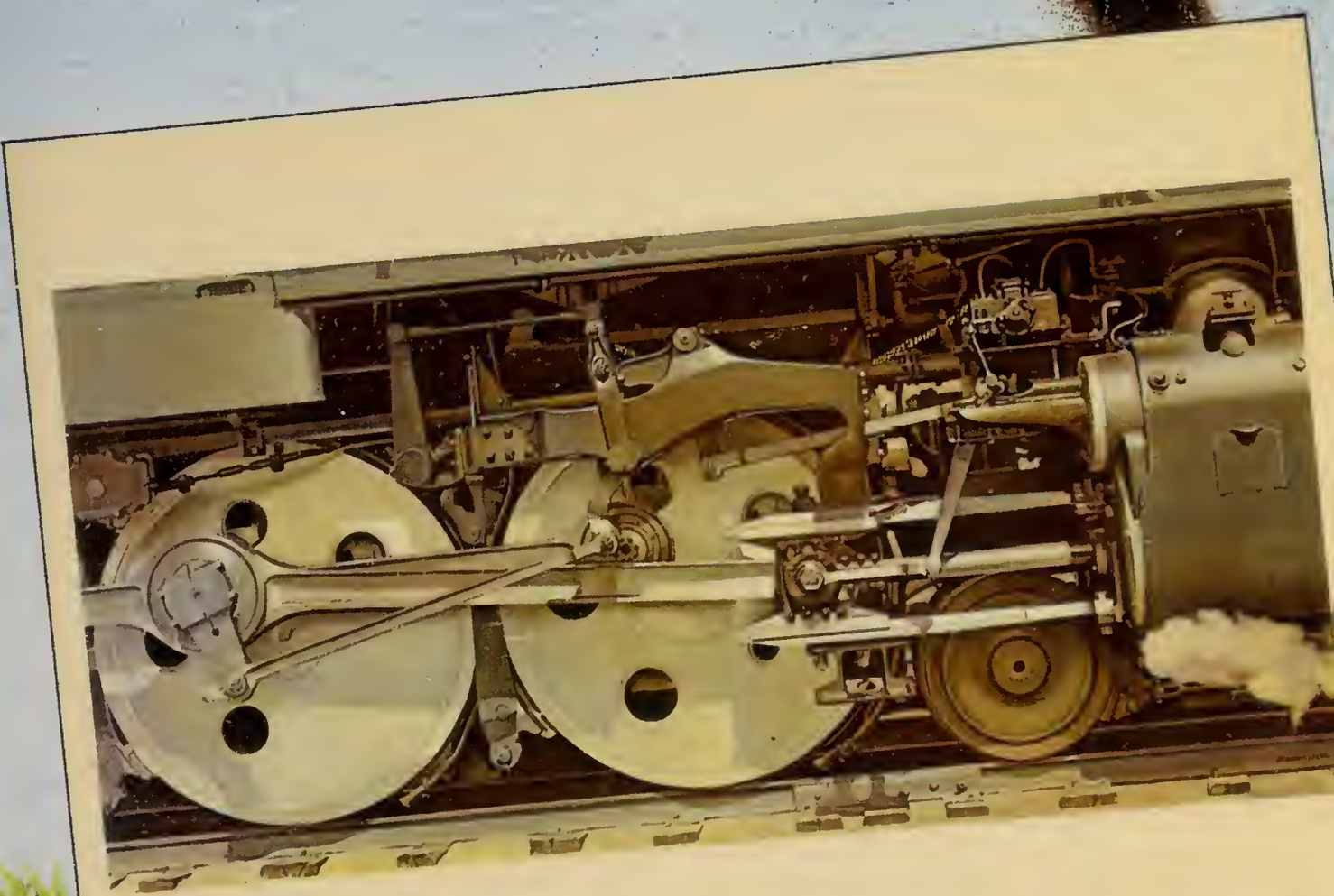
FIELD



FIELD

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CONTENTS

BIRD-WATCHING

Across the channel, Mare Island welders cut
bulkheads & winch up
riveted slabs of the WW II

mine-tender. I can see
the torches flash against visualized rust;
I can see so far
back that the war cruelties are camouflaged

as feats of scruple.
The binoculars sweat rings around my eyes,
& when my arms tire, it's the sky that comes down

fuzzy through the Zeiss
26x10 lens into debris — the shoe, paper news
& condoms, the "beauty

from brevity derived" I can't catalog.
I'm on the flyway for marbled
godwits, scooters & loons,
but taxidermy might have devised what I think

is only a dead heron peppered with grit,
marshgrass poking
out the bird's buggy eyeholes.

I want to get down,
include myself in the focus: the war,

all epithets, between memory & present things
memory can't yet reach.
Though the marsh is a constant

madras-bleed between old soda bottles
that slash grids in the earthbound
walker's boots & the heuristic dieback

of the grass, I'm on one knee
to this Bird-in-the-volleys-of-lesser-birds,
praising glut but lifting
binoculars once more to distance myself

from it. Idolatry begins in one's fear
of being the only thing, saying
to detritus, *let it linger, let even just the feathers*

of it stay — that is why I pick
up my glasses with the little men still in them.
They are so intent on forgetting;

they are so self-contained & innocent,

lit both by the small
circles of sky & by the torches they stroke
against the steel that arches over them.

HALLOWEEN CREATURE

with Spock ears & snout
incongruously mixed, & the other child his mother
& I pretend not to know,
who came home as a tree, bark lapped on

like feathers — both their bodies
are so closely zipped,
buttoned or sewn into the bizarre

that the bodies won't fall apart
in sleep. The younger one's in bed
with inked-on leaf veins still crawling
his hands as I talk

from his brother's bed opposite:
it is Oct. 31 everywhere
& there are no children because
we must do what the costumes tell us —
adults must live

to extinction in Jordache or Izod casuals
while kids have feathers or fur,
& they eat the meat-threaded wind

from burger-stands,
cursed with an appetite for grass.
To tell my sons more, I must make the '40s
Riverview Park & around it nighttime
Chicago literal but dissolving in neon lather:
we're on the 80 ft hump

one's head takes before the stomach follows
Dead Man's Curve
& the roller-coaster cars dive
again into gravity.
You hear screams best under the structure,

your forehead against a cool girder,
your bladder tight with Orange Crush or beer,
believing in "alone"
though there must be a dozen other pissers
in the dark around you, & that colicky moan

each gives dopplers to a metal-on-metal
group screech as the train passes,
& in the overhead bars of light
you see paint flecks
snowing: the structure bearing up all the orbits

shivers but stays.
Ignore all this, the Parachute Jump,
Giant Wheel, but be drawn in yr listening
to the carousel where animals
once danced their limited steps around

a march tune's 3-minute circuit,
& now you see only humans
on poles prancing for their riders
the intricate human round

of gestures — you must ride them,
selecting your parents by what you want,
riding, your furry thighs
tightening at the percussion parts

of the song, your hearts accelerating
until you sleep.

VESPERS

Friday night,
the dead life
between poems —

through the boughs of the pine
the seashell harbor, its surface
scored and dazzling,

and the husbands stepping down
from Bus 7, and the wives
parking the second cars uphill —

the pine waves its feather:
Bye, now! See you later!

I've read that, in tremendous heat,
these trees are most fertile, letting down

crazy seed propellers —
then everything lies calmly
in the charred earth

waiting, and waiting:
wings, wood, shingled cones
fat as owls' bodies —

like the seed, a buoy
lands in the false harbor.
I have to go to bed,
so . . .

Thank you for the night,
for the child, for white paint

which covers the past . . . Thank you
for the drug, for entropy, for human
love, though it does not last;

and the tree which predicts
its own shape, so extreme
on one edge

but quite tame really,
the play of consciousness
above the great heart

opened in fire . . .

MAGNOLIA

The final stage of flowering is mystery,
the hood of that one blossom pulled
like the Benedictine's over the divided
self, her brown, reliable sisters gone

in their mild exodus but gone less in
the weak way memory goes than as a line . . .
beauty did live. We must insist on that,
before it was pulled back inside

by the imaginary string. Beauty
did live. Almost a person,
breathing lightly. Riding
in the ambulance of spring.

A JOURNAL OF ONE SIGNIFICANT LANDSCAPE

April again. Aries comes forth
and we are released
Into the filter veins and vast line
Under the elm and apple wood.
The last of the daffodils
Sulphurs the half-jade grass
against the arbor vitae.

Better the bodying forth,
better the coming back.
I listen to what the quince hums,
Its music filling my ear
with its flushed certitude.
Wild onion narrows the latitudes.

I pale and I acquiesce.
Gravity empties me
Stem by stem through its deep regalia,
Resplendent and faintly anodyne,
The green of my unbecoming
urging me earthward.

I long to escape through the white light in the rose root,
At ease in its clean, clear joy:
Unlike the spring flowers, I don't unfold, one petal
after another, in solitude —
Happiness happens, like sainthood, in spite of ourselves.

The day dies like a small child,
blushed and without complaint,
Its bedcovers sliding quietly to the floor.
How still the world's room holds,
everything stemming its breath
In exhilaration and sadness.

Halfway through May and I am absolved,
A litter of leaves like half-notes
held tight in the singing trees.
Against the board fence, the candle tips of the white pines
Gutter and burn, gutter and burn
on the blue apse of the sky.

How do we get said what must be said,
Seep of the honeysuckle like bad water, yellow
And slick, through the privet hedge,
tiger iris opening like an eye
Watching us steadily now, aware that what we see

In its disappearance and inexactitude
Is not what we think we see.
How does one say these things?
The sheathed beaks of the waxed magnolia
Utter their couched syllables,

Shh of noon wind mouthing the last word.
Deep in the crevices and silk ravines of the snow rose,
Under the purple beards at the lily's throat,
silence stocks its cocoon:
Inside, in its radiance,
the right answer waits to be born.

Truthful words are not beautiful,
beautiful words not truthful,
Lao Tzu says. He has a point.
Nor are good words persuasive:
The way of heaven can do no real harm,
and it doesn't contend.

Beginning of June, clouds like medieval banderoles
Out of the sky's mouth
back toward the east,
Explaining the painting as Cimabue once did
In Pisa, in tempera,
angels sending the message out

In those days. Not now, down here
Where the peaches swell like thumbs, and the little apples and pears
Buzz like unbroken codes on the sun's wire,
their secret shoptalk
The out-takes we would be privy to,

But never are, no matter how hard we look at them or listen.
Still, it's here in its gilt script,
or there, speaking in tongues.
One of the nondescript brown-headed black birds that yawp
And scramble in and out of the trees
latches me with his lean eye
And tells me I'm wasting my time,
something I'm getting used to
In my one life with its one regret
I keep on trundling here
in order to alter it.
You're wasting your time, he tells me again. And I am.

It is not possible to read the then in the now.
It is not possible to see the blood in the needle's eye,
Sky like a sheet of carbon paper
repeating our poor ills
On the other side.
We must be good to each other.

Like a developing photograph,
the dawn hillsides appear
Black-and-white then green then rack-over into color
Downcountry along the line,
House and barn as the night blanks
away into morning's fixer . . .

Like dreams awaiting their dreamers, cloud-figures step forth
Then disappear in the sky, ridgelines are cut,
grass moans
Under the sun's touch and drag:
With a sigh the day explains itself, and reliefs into place . . .

Like light bulbs, the pears turn on,
birds plink, the cow skull spins and stares
In heaven's eye, sunshine
Cheesecloths the ground beside the peach trees.
The dragon maple shivers its dry sides . . .

I put down these memorandums of my affections,
As John Clare said,
memory through a secondary
Being the soul of time
and life the principal but its shadow,
July in its second skin glistering through the trees . . .

For the Heavenly Father desires that we should see,
Ruysbroeck has told us,
and that is why
He's ever saying to our innermost spirit one deep
Unfathomable word,
and nothing else . . .

Thus stone upon stone,
And circle on circle I raised eternally:
So step after step
I drew back in sure ascension to paradise,

Someone once wrote about Brunelleschi —
Giovanbattista Strozzi,
Vasari says — when he died
Vaulting the double dome of S. Maria del Fiore
In Florence,
which everyone said was impossible.

Paolo Uccello, on the other hand, once drew
The four elements as animals:
a mole for earth,
A fish for water, a salamander for fire, and for air
A chameleon which lives on air
and thus will assume whatever color.

In his last days, secluded inside his house, he stayed up
All night in his study, his wife said,
intent on perspective.
O, what a lovely thing perspective is, he'd call out.

August thrusts down its flushed face,
disvectored at the horizon.

How is the vanishing point
when you look at it hard?
How does it lie in the diamond zones?
What are the colors of disappearance,
pink and grey,
Diamond and pink and grey?
How are they hard to look at?

September's the month that moves us
out of our instinct:
As the master said:
for knowledge, add something everyday,
To be wise, subtract . . .
This is the season of subtraction,

When what goes away is what stays,
pooled in its own grace,
When loss isn't loss, and fall
Hangs on the cusp of its one responsibility,
Tiny erasures,
palimpsest over the pear trees.

Somewhere inside the landscape
Something reverses.
Leaf-lines recoil, the moon switches
Her tides, dry banks begin to appear
In the long conduits
under the skin and in the heart.

I listen to dark October just over the hill,
I listen to what the weeds exhale,
and the pines echo,
Elect in their rectitude:
The idea of emptiness is everything to them.
I smooth myself, I abide.

— "The outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."

— "A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image . . ."

— Joan Didion on James Jones

— "Cezanne: 'I have my motif . . .' (He joins his hands).
Gasquet: 'What?'
Cezanne: 'Yes . . . (He repeats his gesture, spreads his hands, the ten fingers open, brings them slowly together, slowly, then joins them, squeezes them, clenches them, inserts them together.) 'There's what must be attained . . . There must not be a single link too loose, a hole through which the emotion, the light or the truth may escape. I advance my entire picture at one time, you understand . . . I bring together in the same spirit, the same faith, all that is scattered . . . I take from right, from left, from here, there, everywhere, tones, colors, shades; I fix them; I bring them together . . . My canvas joins hands. It does not vacillate.' "

— J. Gasquet, *Cezanne*

— My poems are put together in tonal blocks, in tonal units that work off one another. Vid. Cezanne's use of color and form. I try to do that in sound patterns within the line, in the line within the stanza, and the stanza within the poem. Tonal units of measure, tonal rhythms in time.

— "The great ones always speak from the other side."

— Leonard Michaels

— "There is a kind of cleanness and virginity in it, in this looking away from oneself; it is as though one were drawing, one's gaze bound to the object, inwoven with Nature, while one's hand goes its own way somewhere below, goes on and on, gets

timid, wavers, is glad again, goes on and on below the face that stands like a star above it, not looking, only shining. I feel as though I had always worked that way; face gazing at far things, hands alone. And so it surely ought to be. I shall be like that again in time."

— Rilke

— "The move toward a disintegration of the object in some of the most memorable works of a painter so passionately attached to objects is the attraction and the riddle of Cezanne's last phase. The element that usurped its place, the patch of color in itself . . ."

— Gowing on Cezanne

— The primary level of the poem is bread mold. The secondary meaning, the resonance, is the mystery that heals, the penicillin.

— "The recourse to talent shows a defect in the imagination."

— Georges Braque

— Pure technique is the spider's web without the spider — it glitters and catches but doesn't kill.

— Poems should come out of the body, like webbing from the spider. They should not be entered and driven, like a car, like a vehicle made by someone else.

— "In other words, Williams' universe was tied up with his body. Blake's universe didn't seem to be tied up with his body."

— Allen Ginsberg

— Art tends toward the certainty of making connections. The artist's job is to keep it apart, thus giving it tension and keeping it alive, letting the synapse spark.

— When the finger of God appears, it's usually the wrong finger.

— Ultimately, it isn't important 'who says what to whom,' as the discursive writers would have one believe. What is important, ultimately, is *what* is said, and *how*. It really doesn't matter if

Dante is telling Virgil or telling us. It matters what he is telling, and how he tells it.

— The best narrative is that which is least in evidence to the eye.

— Emily Dickinson had a stationary psyche — everything, like a process shot, unrolled before her. She sat still, and enclosed, and let it happen, writing always from a stationary point of view. Everything went by her window. Whitman's, of course, is ambulatory.

— The ultimate duty and fate of the poet is visionary . . .

— One is always three lines away from 'getting it all said, once and for all.'

— The great poet of light is Dante. Everyone else is shadow.

— "A painter can say all he wants to with fruits or flowers, or even clouds."

— Monet

— "You know, I should like to be the St. Francis of still-life."

— Monet

— The metaphysics of the commonplace, the metaphysics of the quotidian, is what I'm after.

— "The poet is the priest of the invisible."

— Wallace Stevens

— What do I want my poems to do? I want them to sing and to tell the story of my life.

— "A poem need not have a meaning, and like most things in nature often does not."

— Wallace Stevens

— Actually, I usually write about whatever swims into my mind. And since I'm always, unlike Heraclitus, sinking in the same water, it's usually the same fish that swim in — ghostfish, deathfish, firefish, whatever can rise to the top.

— Poetry is always transcribing from the invisible. It's also a craft.

— Every poet's secret desire is to be Rimbaud.

— All of us have a desire to say something, but few of us have something to say.

— The poet is engaged in re-creating the familiar through introducing the unfamiliar.

— The organization of things in relation to each other, not to a fixed ideal. The fugue, for instance. The fugue is abstract . . .

— Poetry doesn't lie in stating facts. It lies in making images.

— All art is reminiscence. The best art reminisces about the future.

— Their worst is the best that some people have to offer.

— Poetry either maximizes the difference between the written word and the spoken word (Hopkins, Crane, etc.), or it minimizes that difference (Williams, Marianne Moore, etc.). But it always works off that difference.

— Eight riffs on the image:

1. The image is always a mirror. Sometimes we see ourselves in it, and sometimes we don't.
2. Images are the wheels of the poem.
3. The image, like the water drop, contains its own world, and flashes its own colors.
4. The image is always spiritual, as it is beyond us, and analogous and seditious.
5. The image is what connects us to What's-Out-There.
6. If the 'line' is what separates us from the beasts, then the 'image' is what keeps us apart.
7. The image is how we say it when we're too embarrassed to say it.
8. An image went out for a walk and met itself when it got there.

— Unless you love the music of words, you are merely a pamphleteer.

— If you can't be the genius, be the one the genius admires.

— I like to think the absence of people in my poems enhances their presence in the objects and landscapes . . .

— People go to poetry readings for the same reasons they go to church — they think they should and they hope they'll learn something. One writes the poems for the same reasons.

— *China Trace:* the most condensed image possible that will still carry the necessary information.

— It either adds or it takes away: nothing is ever neutral in poems.

— Poems are made up of details; good poems are made up of good details; great poems are made up of 'luminous' details.

— "Roethke has dealt always with very concrete things (yet) there is a sense in which these very concretions are abstractions."

— Kenneth Burke

— You have to have 'stride' in your lines: you have to hit the right notes hard, and you have to be underway when you do it. Keep it in motion; and hit the right notes hard.

— "The point of truth comes when a poet goes from writing private poems in a public language to writing public poems in a private language."

— Mark Strand

— "No real artist symbolizes or allegorizes, but every real work of art exhales symbols and allegories."

— Bernard Berenson

— There is nothing so beautiful as the country is, when the country is good.

— I go to Dante as I go to the dictionary — to find out what something means.

— I live between the adjective and the noun.

— Poetry is the footprints of the story.

— As a writer of poems, I've never had anything, really, except a good ear and a bad memory . . .

— All of our lines are ground down like glass, some of them faceted, some of them dust.

— ". . . there is one sense we get through the letter and another which we get through the thing the letter signifies; and the first is called literal, but the second allegorical or mystic."

— Dante, letter to Can Grande

— "She started taking herself seriously rather than her work seriously."

— Hemingway on Gertrude Stein

— "The poet does not impose meaning, he unlocks it in finding a new arrangement."

— Hugh Kenner

— The longer you write, the diviner the inspiration gets.

— More often than not, the title is all a poem needs of narrative structure.

— "Truth is Catholic, but the search for it is Protestant."

— W. H. Auden

— Renunciation is stronger than participation.

— All good poets sing hymns.

— The problem is still how to get the long, declarative line to pack the imagistic freight it must carry without coagulating.

— Wm Carlos Wms is the Imagist who has taken the primary concept of the movement to its logical end — the listing of objects, the exquisite listing of objects.

— "Contradiction is a lever of transcendence."

— Simone Weil

— "Prayer is absolute, unmixed attention."

— Simone Weil

— All great art tends toward the condition of the primitive.

— Technique is — should be — a movable paradigm.

— Always maintain at the proper level; never dip down. It's always better to be Rimbaud and unknown than to walk in the steps of the Parnassians. To sing and be pure is better than chambered footsteps.

— Poetry is an exile's art. Anyone who writes it seriously, writes from an exile's point of view.

— We write approximations.

— "In a time when the whole world was chasing after fame, a young man, poor and unknown, humbly started to study a round oblong apple, the shoot of a leaf, a transparent fruit. He felt that there was poetry in everything and he proved that others too wanted to feel it . . . His light, of course, is not the light of the day or the night, it is altogether not a real light, but rather a stylistic principle, an abstract force and a spiritual quality."

— Lionel Venturi on Caravaggio

— "Theory is all right, but it is like eating; when you overeat you get sick."

— Josef Sudek

— "I like to tell stories about the life of inanimate objects, to relate something mysterious: the seventh side of a dice."

— Josef Sudek

— "I don't have many people in my photographs, especially in the landscapes. To explain this, you see, it takes me awhile before I prepare everything. Sometimes there are people there, but

before I'm ready they go away, so what can I do, I won't chase them back."

— Josef Sudek

— "A man's a genius just to look like himself. Play yourself."

— Thelonius Monk

— The parts are always more than the sum of their wholes.

— The correct image is always a seed — it contains its own explanation, and defines itself. It grows and flowers of its own accord.

— We lip away at the void, like the tide, gaining an inch this year, an inch next year.

— Everything must be temporary if it's going to be permanent.

— Pound was the last Victorian. He was the bridge to Modernism. It was his own body he threw on the barbed wire and that the others stepped on and over into No Man's Land.

— All tactile things are doors to the infinite.

— All of my writing life has been given to writing the poetic line. Sometimes poems have come of it, but what I was interested in most often was the line, and what its measure led to. More often than not, it led to revelation.

— "Therefore, as one returned, I feel,
Odd secrets of the line to tell.
Some sailor, skirting foreign shores,
Some pale reporter from the awful doors
Before the seal."

— Emily Dickinson

— One should always write as 'some pale reporter from the awful doors/Before the seal,' 'Odd secrets of the line to tell.' To try less is to settle for 2nd best.

— I would like to be able to write poems the way Zoot Sims plays the saxophone, keeping the line in a wild surmise . . .

— 'What I like' isn't what's good for me. 'What I like' is familiar, what's good for me is foreign and unknown . . .

— "The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God . . . The figures of the essential poets should be spiritual figures."

— Wallace Stevens

— All my long poems are short poems in disguise.

— The secret of life is mathematics. It's an equation. If you don't believe that it's the same way in poetry, that this piece of language, for instance, this description, equals the inarticulate ecstasy of being, then you believe in something different from what I do.

— To say that poetry describes but doesn't explain is only to say that true description is explanation, the right rose *is* the right rose.

— Not to the world, perhaps, but to yourself, you're only as good as your last poem. Or you should be, if you're serious.

— One reason so many of us like Hart Crane, and place him high, very high, in our American Pantheon, is because he, like Hopkins, did what he felt like with language in his poems, as we, on the contrary, are very timid to do. We admire their audacity and sense of self. Or aspirations to a sense of self. In any case, they heard their own solo, and they took it.

— Question: What would you *really* like to do? Answer: I would like to make structures, poetic structures, that haven't been made before.

— Like Mallarme (more or less) I want to hang in the center of myself like a sacred spider, radiating out, axle by silken axle, and then encircling it with a glittering wheel.

— Re: *China Trace*. Its full attempt at transcendence (and failure thereof) is just starting to come through to me the way I had wanted it to when I wrote it. The 'character' going from reli-

gious release (childhood) through an attempted ascension, ends up stuck in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars (in the Dantescan cosmology), a man-made heaven. Divine guidance and intervention is missing. It is a willed assumption, and he can go no higher as he only believes what he can see. But there he is, after 46 chapters in his own book-length poem, pasted onto the sky, a day late and a dollar short.

— Essential places produce essential imagery.

— One should write with a kind of meticulous abandon.

— When, as a writer, you move from 'perspective' to 'answers,' you move from discovery to ruin. Don't do it.

— Sometimes we think we're this, or we think we're that, but we're never more than servants of the language. Never.

— A metaphor is a link in the long chain which leads us to the invisible.

— I want nothing for myself, I want everything for my poems . . .

— In poems, the bodily quest becomes the spiritual quest.

— The way out is the way in.

— If you look at it long enough, you won't recognize it.

— The most beautiful poetic line I know:
"Perch'io non spero di tornar giàmai, Ballatetta, in Toscana . . ."

— Guido Cavalcanti

— "Rodin's belief that energy is beauty holds thus far, namely, that all our ideas of beauty of line are in some way connected with our ideas of swiftness or easy power of motion, and we consider ugly those lines which connote unwieldy slowness in moving."

— Ezra Pound

— The love of God is the loneliest thing I know of.

— Four approaches to the poetic line:
1. Music
2. Imagination
3. Storyline
4. Structure (Form is a sub-species of this: form imposes, structure allows. Or: form is finite, structure is infinite . . .)

— We're all ventriloquists, stuffing our words out through the same mouth.

— One has to imagine that Emily Dickinson was inhabited. How else could she know those things?

— *The Cantos* are a notational guide to an ever-expanding literary universe, i.e., they are spatial, not temporal. If poems were to be thought of as 'coming out' or 'going back,' *The Cantos* are going back in a big way. Back to that pure, heretical light where all good starts from.

— All the great poets of light — Dante, Pound, Blake, Calalcanti, Dickinson, Donne, etc. — can be said to be 'going back.' All of them have the small, indestructible diamond of neoplatonism under their skins, or tucked in some loose fold of their centers, the ticket home.

— *Ad infinitum* is a nice number, but hard to count to.

— "Q: You claim your work is not about illustrating anything.
A: No. I always think what painters and poets do for you is unlock the valves of sensation and bring you nearer to a kind of reality. Much more than telling you anything. They just make you aware without it being a dictatorial awareness . . . I think of myself as an image maker."

— Francis Bacon interview

— "Poetry is mainly a matter of the noise it makes."

— Basil Bunting

— Thus if 'only emotion endures,' as Pound says, it is the emotion inherent in the line itself (as he points out), it is the emotional weight and gravity of the *line*. Emotion has nothing to do with 'content' (the Word, as it were); that is a given. 'Subject matter' and 'content' have little to do with each other. They are separate things which occasionally intersect. The emotional weight a line carries is in direct proportion to the material of the enterprise it is supporting. Content is the material behind the subject matter. It stands like a Greek chorus in back of the performance, unseen and seen at the same time. Style, technique, the iron thread through the line: this is the 'emotion' that endures.

— "Everything after Giotto is decadent in form, through advancing in execution."

— Gerard Manley Hopkins

— Since the poem, "The Southern Cross," I've been doing a kind of ghost graft: splicing real situations and incidents (language, even) onto an imaginary 'tree' until the 'tree,' by virtue of its appendages, has materialized into a whole, a recognizable thing. A sort of grafting onto the invisible until one gets an outline or two from its invisible garden. A gardener of the infinite . . .

— Dino Campana's lines are either short of breath or over-inflated. There's no steady breathing. And that's not a bad thing — it shows he's not sleeping.

— If any word is as good as any other word in any given order — sound taking precedent — they still have to be the right words in the right order: composure in chaos is sweet music.

— Style is grace under pressure, to borrow a phrase. The pressure is the tension inherent in the various component parts of the poem. Grace is how you deal with them musically, imagistically, structurally. True vision is great style.

— The problem — how to use *all* the page in structuring a poem . . . Using the dropped line, the 'low rider,' you are able to use both sides of the page, use both left and right hand margins, and you can carry the long line on as an imagistic line rather than a rhetorical or discursive line.

— All the well-made, passionless, wooden little poems one sees everywhere nowadays, panting like tongues in the books and magazines. But poetry is not a tongue. Poetry is the dark beast with its mouth open, and you've got to walk down that tongue and into the windy mouth. And you've got to sing while you walk.

— If you can't sing, you've got to get out of the choir.

— My poetic structures tend toward the condition of spider webs — tight in their parts but loose in the wholes, and endlessly repetitious . . .

— Some parts of nature are not Heraclitean. You can, for example, step on the same snake twice — a new skin, but always the same snake.

— Rimbaud and Hart Crane show how extreme you can be at either end (structural, formal), and still be the same.

— All poems are translations.

— "I have my motif," Cezanne said, speaking of Mt S Victoire. And I have mine — the architecture of the poem, the landscape of the word. Cezanne meant the *reassembly* of S Victoire. I mean the same thing.

— Nothing is a bridge in a lyric poem. All lines should be peaks.

— One must write *words*, not *language*.

— The main aim is toward beauty and clarity of line and structure.

— To alter Truffaut's text, the poem of tomorrow appears to me as even more personal than an individual and autobiographi-

cal novel, like a confession, or a diary. The young poets will express themselves in the first person and will relate what has happened to them . . . and it will be enjoyable because it will be new and true.

— I've never understood why 'sincerity' and 'sentiment' in poems automatically excluded music. Isn't it possible to have a poetic line that has both music and sincerity?

— Poems should be written line by line, not idea by idea.

— The measure is the meaning.

— In poems, all considerations are considerations of form . . .

— In Keats's letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, the 'egotistical sublime' of Wordsworth is posited against, apparently, 'negative capability.' The poetical character, for the most part, assumes a negative capability when it operates, submerging itself in whatever it is portraying or explaining. It moves like a chameleon through the landscape, assuming persona after persona and is never 'itself.' The 'I' in Wordsworth, on the other hand, is *always* itself, never a persona, and attracts nothing of the landscape to itself. When the 'I' in Wordsworth walks through a field of daffodils, it is always Wordsworth, his real self, speaking, an egotistical sublime (from its pantheistic nature, or aspirations, one assumes). In our time, surely some fusion has occurred, some kind of Egotistical Capability, where the 'I' both is the speaker *per se* and is, to a lesser degree, subsumed in the landscape. Or a Negative Sublime.

— Art tends toward the condition of circularity and completion. The artist's job is to keep the circle from joining — to work in the synapse.

— Good speech tends toward the condition of poetry, good poetry tends toward the condition of speech. The closer each comes to the other, the better off each is. But they never meet. Work in the synapse!

— All great art is neoplatonic: you're always trying to make something that's the best replica of what it really is: you're always trying to make a replica of what you know is there.

— The ultimate condition of art is inaccessible. 'Accessibility' is only a matter of degree from this adamant norm.

— Do poems have to sing? No. Do good poems have to sing? Probably. Do great poems have to sing? Absolutely.

— If you end a poem with a statement, it should come as though forced naturally through the funnel of the poem, and not as though it had been stuck at the end to cover up a hole.

— There seem to be three overlapping, but distinct, periods in most poets' writing lives:

1. 'It's the singer, not the song': early
2. 'It's the song, not the singer': middle
3. 'It's the singer, not the song': later

For the really good poet, of course, it's always a combination at all times.

— Poems are voice-overs behind the fact.

— Describe, but don't be descriptive.

— ". . . a knowledge of technique; of technique of surface and technique of content . . . poetry is an art and not a pastime (sic) . . .

— Ezra Pound

— Style is everything and nothing at the same time. But mostly it is everything.

— The River of Light is not a tributary.

— Form is at the center of all significance in poetry.

— What you *see*, wherever and however you *see* it — this is the proper subject matter.

— Language is just a stand-in for the Absolute.

— The *status quo* is always the past: you're either a step ahead or you're a step behind.

— Poetry is not a reflection, of course, the famous mirror up to Nature. It is a reconstruction, which is why style is so important: as you rebuild, you rebuild in your own way. And which is why nothing is ever 'this' or 'that' but is 'toward this' or 'in the direction of that.' Rearrangement and reassembly. Painting knows this. *Ut pictura poesis*: new structures, new dependencies.

— UFO is what I am pulled by and try to answer to: Ultimate Formal Organization.

— Form is everything to me, subject matter is nothing.

— If you can tell the dancer from the dance, one of you isn't doing his job.

— You can't take a poem apart unless you are able to put one together.

— ". . . style is the writer, and therefore what a man is, rather than what he knows, will at last determine his style. If one is to write, one must believe — in the truth and worth of the scrawl, in the ability of the reader to receive and decode the message . . ."

— E.B. White

— So, style is character . . .

— Poetry is a kind of money.

— Essence is not ironic.

— ". . . he regarded the colors as numinous essences, beyond which he 'knew' nothing, and the 'diamond zones of God' remained white . . ." (Cezanne). Change 'colors' to 'words' and 'white' to 'blank' and you have something I believe . . .

— The inner eye, the necessary retina, that isolates and imprints

the emotive moment . . . The inner ear, the necessary sounding board that fixes the rhythm and time . . .

— Don't use more words than the motion or emotion required, or looked for, need . . .

— On composition and the avant-garde: If you don't do what *they* did, you'll be doing *what* they did.

— It's not how you put it together, it's how, like Matisse, you keep it apart.

— All my poems seem to be an ongoing argument with myself about the unlikelihood of salvation . . .

— "I'm after new chords, new ways of syncopating, new figures, new runs, how to use notes differently. That's it, just using notes differently."

— Thelonius Monk

— There is a sequence and consequence to all things.

— "If to be a 'Romantic' means to be a man acutely aware of being caught in an existence that denies him the fullness for which he craves, to feel that he is defined by his tension towards something else, by his capacity for faith, for hope, for longing, to think of himself as a wanderer seeking a country that is always distant, but made ever-present to him by the quality of the love that 'groans' for it, then Augustine has imperceptibly become a 'Romantic': and the *Confessions* which he wrote soon after, when he was the Catholic bishop of Hippo, will be a monumental statement of that most rare mood: 'Let me leave them outside, breathing into the dust, and filling their eyes with earth, and let me enter into my chamber and sing my songs of love to Thee groaning with inexpressible groaning in my distant wandering, and remembering Jerusalem with my heart stretching upwards in longing for it: Jerusalem my Fatherland, Jerusalem who is my mother . . .'"

— Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*

ON HUNTING AND OTHER THINGS

Be a hunter, get to know
the gentle art of shooting.
Game will turn up by itself
for your shot. You've got
what you want to hit.
A bit of blood — the strong drink to boot,
here's to your health!

Be of average talent — the work
calls for strength, stay a pupil
in the class of so-and-so, don't turn rowdy.
You're not alive unless you live for something.
Laziness is altogether different from fantasy.
No one will laugh behind your back
as long as you stick to it.
A back has something laughable
for those who've gotten farther
along than you.

Or why not be hunted. People who suffer
suddenly experience a sort of happiness.
They don't run away anymore — where to?
Sometimes they sing they're so happy, their eyes full of tears.
They enter the target area.
They tumble. They fall: their happiness before their eyes,
it takes their head between its hands
and plants a kiss.

BEYOND

People in clothing go by, their blood
pumping bright red into their faces, hypertonically.
Life, history, blood pressure — I'm not sure anymore
whether I died last night or not, or
a long long time ago, several times over.

A hired hand, long dead, addresses me.
That's the way it is "beyond." No more tickets
to the lush roses. The sky, stitched by swallows,
has never been correct and the homophile
youth opposite talks to me
like a certain girl: Thanks a lot and that's enough now.

It's this craze for sleep, being dead,
everything gone, truly everything
under your eyelids, finally some release from sense
and nonsense, inside and out.
You're not travelling through your own little country
anymore,
or: there's nothing in your head now, the way there was
when I saw her the first time and
was already dead. But I could still tell:
love's a girl in a summer dress
from an unread novel — how pleasant, a feeling!

I don't need a room anymore for working
on survival, a quick glance between the bushes
under the window, where night's settled.
Being dead, fundamentally, is nicely without feeling.
The butt of a cigarette glows — that's enough, in the end.

translated by Stuart Friebert

HEAVEN'S RING
A Cycle of Poems

STARGAZER'S DEATH

He had to die they say
Stars were closer to him
Even than people

The ants ate him they say
He fancied stars give birth to ants
And ants to stars
So he filled his house with ants

His celestial debauchees they say
Cost him his head
And the silly rumor about a dagger
With human fingerprints

He found himself out of this world
They say he went to find a sunflower
In which every heart's every star's
Road comes together

He had to die they say

HEAVEN'S RING

Ring nobody's ring
How did you get lost
Fall out of the blue somewhere
More likely everywhere than somewhere

Why did you instantly marry
Your old your age-old shine
To your young emptiness

They neither remember you
Nor their wedding night

Your shine has taken to drink
Your emptiness has put on weight
And you're lost again

Here's my ring finger
Calm down on it

GOOD FOR NOTHING

You slept good for nothing
And dreamt you were something

Something caught fire
The flames writhed
Their suffering blind

You woke up good for nothing
Warmed your back
On a dream flame

You didn't see the flame's suffering
Whole worlds of suffering
Your back's nearsighted

The flame went out
Its suffering got its eyes back
Then it too went out blissfully

ORPHAN ABSENCE

You didn't have a real father
The day you first saw the world within you
Your mother was not at home
It was a mistake you were born

Built like an empty gorge
You smell of absence
Alone you gave birth to yourself

You fidget with rags on fire
Break your heads one after the other
Jump in and out of your mouths
To give youth back to your old mistake

Bend down naked if you can
Down to my last letter
And follow its track

It seems to me my little orphan
That it leads
Into some sort of presence

THE SHADOW MAKER

You walk forever and ever
Over your own individual infinity
From head to heel and back

You're your own source of light
The zenith is in your head
In your heel its setting

Before it dies you let your shadows out
To lengthen to estrange themselves
To work miracles and shame
And bow down only to themselves

At zenith you reduce the shadows
To their proper size
You teach them to bow to you
And as they bow down to disappear

You're coming this way even today
But the shadows won't let us see you

THE STARRY SNAIL

You crawled after the rain
The starry rain

The stars made a house for you
Out of their bones
Where are you taking it now on your towel

Time limps behind you
To overtake you to run you over
Let your horns out snail

You crawl on a huge cheek
That you'll never glimpse
Straight into the plow of nothingness

Turn to the life-line
On my dream hand
Before it's too late

Make me the inheritor
Of your wonder-working silver towel

IMMIGRANT STARS

You looked at each other stars
On the sly so the sky won't see you
You meant well

Got it all backwards

The morning found you cold
Far from the hearth
Far from the heaven's gate

Look at me stars
On the sly so the earth won't see it
Give me secret signs
I'll give you a stick of cherry wood

One of my wrinkles for a path
One of my eyelashes for a guide
To take you back home

translated by Charles Simic

SUMMER AND HALO

A wasp darts in my room
the angel of July
he's made the curtains yellow
and the four walls, too.
And as forests and grainfields
walk off before my window
summer — bare-chested —
parades in front of the mirror.
Everywhere he turns —
the splendor of claymounds,
halo of birds,
your face washed of dust
and death in a torrent of July.
Outside a tree buzzes,
motor whistles, taking flight —
the great roads that leave off early,
your life that stopped too soon.
All is aching rotation,
summer, and wasp —
gold crumbles and cools around me,
thumping in worldly splendor.

TO REMEMBER MYSELF

I forget myself
like the names of rivers
or minerals.
I'm a stone-alphabet
tangled in dust
under hills growing dark.
But when you whisk by
smiling out of the past
your laughter touches
green branches,
and cowardly death
is jilted again:
suddenly summer is in me,
summer is all around;
on every hilltop
I'm as vivid as someone
who knows he'll have
green-eyed children,
or who will leave
the country for good.
I needed your hair,
the bones of your face;
I needed the scaffold
of your blighted butterflies
to remember myself
and the needle carried
between your fingers:
the dumb-show
pierced by the light
of my electricity.

ALL TIME

To wall myself in a white room
  without windows!
To be completely alone
  with my conspiring hopes!
All time would be mine again:
  the winter of haybales
    shuffled in the cold,
  the fall of traveling ants
    and the year's last rains
      when scythe lies soaking
      in the tares
        like a soldier
          bled to death on the front.
And I would be obsolete once more
  body and soul nerves and bone
  light strung to infinity
    light to light unending.
The memory of triumphant metal wheels
  would not come back,
    the hellish clockwork
      stopped for good.
Death would be
  a butterfly on a pin
  its impeccable shadow
    the start of my poems.
To then be able to write poetry
  with my eyes! —
    for a country set aimlessly
      to wander, and for you
        who could only sit and watch me
          with great, round, leaden eyes.

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT — MAY

I've always loved clouds gathering in May,
why shouldn't I have a little rain
when I die, too? My wreaths would be soaked
like the long gold inscription trailing off,
ribbon-wise. The torrent would beat down
on your eyes like windows thrown open waiting.
And all of you would get soaked, too;
your faces, foreheads, padded shoulders.
As you dried on the long way home
the road with its chestnuts — my displaced
and denounced life — would rise to evaporate
from you, into the heights of May.

translated by Christine Molinari

POEMS AT CHRISTMASTIME

I

If you think of it long enough, and with
so inward an eye that all the medical
textbook illustrations become red
and blue with your own vital tracery;
if by some transforming image
the division becomes not "despair
at the level of the cell" but its
opposite — the ladder arcing over the gel
into the egg, the DNA beginning its
mysterium; if the tissues meant to hold
back hold back, and are not taken at the flood;
then you can begin, with banked
and cautious gladness, your petition
to the handmaiden of the Lord.

II

So this is how the word was made flesh,
though surely the word came after
the sublime idea, after the seas'
withdrawal and the islands' emergence
with the first birds and giant lizards
carrying their young into the pampas.
The word as explanation, incarnadine, for
our subsequent collusive passions. Because
first there must have been the tiered
angels in chorus above the blue globe
spinning in its net of lights. Earth
before man. Life before Birth.
The riddle of the metaphor remains;
the conceiving body conceived in the mind.

III

We're snowed in. And the vast prairie blurs
into a horizon so remote that even
the building we're huddled in can't
break the line into human perspective.
The already burdened roofs whiten into
drifts, become a sod pocked by reindeer
who leap from cloud to tundra soundlessly.
The white sky darkens, a cotton-batting
obscuring stars, but a sift of light
from the hospital helicopter brings us
back into the century. We could
track letters in the snow, should it
come to that. We could make the word
and it would be read.

IV

Once again the day shifts. The poem you
think you have been writing disappears
back into the pen, the day sucked back
into inanition as if the blanket of winter
had at last been secured around you.
Cold at the fingertips, the pen cold,
though the baby kicks over its small
furnace, the radiance rising in indigestive
gulps above the abdomen, lodged there
like an ice-ball, hot and cold at once.
What a blaze of reassurance in this acid!
The small bitterness a leavening, the catalyst
for a joy so fierce it rattles the windows,
dislodges the first shelf of snow from the ledge.

V

Then a stink of burnt plastic — the hairdryer's
coil arcing blue and gold to the faucet
in a synesthetic rainbow stink. And the stink
of argument from the house into the garage
where snow chains lie buried somewhere
in a rusted litter, unfindable, tethering
us to the secular world. No midnight
mass and witnessing of the mystery.
At the far end of the cul-de-sac, carolers
are beginning O Holy Night to the snowed
in, soundless world of shut houses and cars
planted in crazy eights along embankments
and drives. Across the glare ice and black
skies, in electric sibilance, Silent Night.

VI

From God, our idea of God, the first gift.
But struggling through the morning drifts,
clumsy and laden with packages, we see
ourselves not as images of grace but as
stopped Darwinian evolutes, so poorly
adapted to this world we sink below the crust
at every step. We are ill-prepared for
our part in the miracle. Except there is
the kingdom of the bells, and the dung-
smells of the stable, and the insubstantial
element which finds its way through our boot-
seams and scarves — a winter breath as sudden
as the stillness after a cry, the Christ child
brought to the breast and sleeping there.

OUT-TAKES FROM SOUTH DAKOTA

It was going on ninety degrees the day we watched them
moving down along a snowy hillside.

They may have been filming the scene where Robert Mitchum
sits frozen to death, wrapped in the raw buffalo hide,
though Mitchum was not even there the day we watched
them.

We were watching from a rise somewhere between Mount
Rushmore
and where we actually saw the Wind River herd
rocking along the roadside, almost like stuffed animals.

I've seen that movie two or three times now. Yet no matter
how I edit the clips of memory, I still can't get
the angles straight. What I have is a strip of scattered bits:
here a president. There a magpie. An impression of the smell
rising from a pile of buffalo hides, after the annual thinning.

I'd already heard how it was done. A sharpshooter
props himself in the rocks and gradually drops them
one by one. The others keep on grazing. They never make
a connection between the shot and the narcolepsy.
The more that go on sleeping, the more it consoles them.

I was still young enough to wish I had been a Sioux.
I'd already read that the land was holy. I remember
filming a long stretch of it through the windshield.
Somewhere in the family there may still exist
what was left on that roll of home movie,
featuring me,
scooping up a rock to throw at the diplydon
or brontosaurus towering over my shoulder. The rock
was imaginary. The monster was concrete.
The plot was minimal, and if there was any thought
it was only some general parody of survival.

PETROGLYPHS

Near Jackson, there are some drawings on a rock
in a hemlock grove. There are a fish and deer
and some six-legged creature that is either
arthropod or spiritual, whose significance
seems to have been lost with the Fort Ancient people.

At Chillicothe we walked between the mounds
and studied the museum: dioramas of the mica burials,
with falcon pipes and pieces of hammered copper,
pictures of how the dead live.

There were giants on the earth in those days: laying
seven-foot skeletons into the graves
yet leaving no further image of themselves.
It's hard to connect them with the things we see
today, even though they could have seen most of it,
asters frosting the shade, leaves floating down the Scioto.

The landscape is mainly faceless, even where oddly manlike
powerline supports go marching single file
across the hills. There's something as non-committal
as the fifteen-dollar pumpkin at the roadside stand.

I spend the evening reading our booklets and watching tv.
I look up from prehistoric Ohio at a portrait of Woodrow
Wilson,
made up of twenty thousand pieces of light or dark cardboard,
each held over the head of a doughboy at Camp Sherman.
On *Real People*, I'm impressed enough by the man
who somehow became naturally mummified
and was kept in the family, brought out from the closet
where he stood, blacker than life, for happy occasions,
that I'm torn between watching and running to tell my wife.

It's seemed a full day. I'm ready enough to believe
that every face on earth could be mapped out
in the leaves of an October hillside, if we really knew
how to look. I suspect it is the kind of thing
the Adena knew: look too hard, you may kill it.
This sense of the unchanging. This iconic seeing.

SEDUCTION RIVER

There was a girl whose body was found by a river.
That kind of love can't last, but when it comes
no barrier fences Heaven from where we live.

Sun and flowers are there, and a breeze,
and a rabbit frozen except for ears and eyes.
Nothing can whisper fast enough to stop that time —

It passes as rivers do, or that first day you die.

LIVING HERE

In Babylon, where I live now, revenge
lights the town, a torrent over a dam:
God speaks in a wire. You go to the door
trembling and look out — no one,
but a giant footprint glows in the street.

And here every house has a mouth,
with windows for eyes. They glare at night,
that revenge I told about. Antennae
pull pictures and speeches out of the air —
you watch and it is people's lives.

Night comes but quiet is not allowed:
no matter the cost, they pour sound
endlessly into time. They'll pay later,
of course. "The future can have what's left" —
that how we say it in Babylon.

POETRY 1986: FOUR REVIEW-ESSAYS

SO MUCH ABOUT LIFE, SO LITTLE OF IT

Nicholas Christopher, A SHORT HISTORY OF BUTTERFLIES (Viking, 1986)

Cornelius Eady, VICTIMS OF THE LATEST DANCE CRAZE (Ommation Press, 1986)

Richard Jones, COUNTRY OF AIR (Copper Canyon Press, 1986)

Timothy Steele, SAPPHICS AGAINST ANGER AND OTHER POEMS (Random House, 1986)

Henri Cole, THE MARBLE QUEEN (Atheneum, 1986)

George Bradley, TERMS TO BE MET (Yale Series of Younger Poets, 1986)

Whether one blames Reaganism, fin de siècle exhaustion, or just the growth of Po Biz, there is something terribly wrong with the current crop of poetry books. Grabbing a random handful from FIELD's shelf of new review copies, all of them first or second books from younger poets, I sat down to the expected feast of new flavors and textures, and the recognition of old ones turned fresh by those twists of language and perception that can make even a cliché come alive and mean more than its usual self. In other words, I expected a good read. Why not? I have never been disappointed before. But today I was disappointed.

The books are attractively presented by some of the most respected presses: Viking, Copper Canyon, Random House, Atheneum, Yale. One is a Lamont selection, one is in the Yale Series of Younger Poets. The eulogies on the back covers are signed by poets whose own work has been widely acknowledged as the best — individual, honest, daring, and crafted with care and patience. Had kindness blunted the judgment of Dave Smith, David Ignatow, Richard Wilbur, X. J. Kennedy, James Merrill, Howard Nemerov, Richard Howard? Fearing my own first impression, I put the books aside, to return to in a cooler moment. But when I did return, a longer look reinforced my initial dismay. The energy that had provoked wonder and delight at the poems

of Wilbur, Stafford, Merwin, Creeley, *et al* and, more recently, at the poems of poets like Sandra McPherson, Marianne Boruch, and Tom Lux is missing in these from both content and style. The poetry overall is couth, tame, and linear, almost to the point of dullness.

The content is the same rich mixture of facts about personal lives, nature, and society that poets of the sixties to mid-eighties used, but here they are literal and untransformed by the tilt of ambivalence or the slow fist of irony. The tone is most often a gentle acceptance of despair, untransformed by the intensity of shame, anger, ecstasy, or wonder. Unlike the poems of Plath or Sexton, there is no Ariel riding into the eye of the sun or "awful rowing toward God" in these books.

A poem pulled at random can illustrate the problem: Nicholas Christopher (praised on his book jacket by Anthony Hecht as "a major poet of his generation," by Richard Howard for his "euphoric vision," and by Howard Nemerov for "poems not too timid to think") takes the reader through a hot, sleepless night in eleven five-line stanzas of fluent blank verse to experience a revelation so intense that "the sea wind must blow in cold, to cool me." The reader does not share the heat of that revelation, not that the poem does not invite, indeed *insist* on its coming: "All night . . . while I lie awake . . . listening/to a different message . . . in my own niche . . . the way some men wait all their lives . . . And after I have convinced myself the dawn has failed me . . ." After this explicit preparation, winged messengers come, but though their hair is "streaming out behind them green and blue —," they act like tour guides, revealing "all the things/ we are told to pray for but never to expect." And though he claims that "the heavens have burst//open for me on bright blinding hinges," and that "the hearts of the millions of strangers with whom/I share this planet and its oblivion have opened/as well, all at once . . . ," he is careful to explain that "I feel more connected to them than ever/because I am afraid, and my fear has charged me." Such rational analysis of feeling at the moment of being transported by feeling tends to deny that revelation ever took place.

NOTES AT SUMMER'S END

All night, the long night of cars inching
westward on glowing highways, radios tuned
to the Prophet Elijah of Trenton delivering his
"celestial weather report" in a fretful monotone,
droning on about floods, eagles, and salvation

while I lie awake into the morning listening
to a different message out of the prickly darkness
that canopies my street and shields my neighbors
from the cold business of the stars, the lives
and deaths of comets, the moon's ebb and flow.

All night while the babies nestle into vaporous
sleep, and the girls from the heartland toss
homesick in furnished rooms, and the old men stare
through the slats of their insomnia, I wait
in my own niche on the continent's edge for sunrise

the way some men wait all their lives for
the right woman or a pile of money or a chance
at redemption, for that sweet lottery ticket
of the spirit which will free them finally
from anguish, heartbreak, and lurking shadows.

All night there have been strange lights to
the north, golden haloes in the south — so many
false intimations of sunrise that one might conclude
our earth has gone astray, sailing into the sun,
or away from it, to some grim suburb of the cosmos.

And after I have convinced myself the dawn
has failed me, messengers — wingéd like
white birds you have never seen, their hair
streaming out behind them green and blue —
come to me with bursting hearts and sing,

all night a hundred, a thousand choruses encircle
me singing in unison of the hour of reawakening,
of brilliant revelation, of all the things
we are told to pray for but never to expect,
and I listen like a true believer,

like my compatriots out in the rain in their
dark cars, with only the voice of the Prophet
Elijah to keep them company, hammering
their loneliness into submission, and their own
faces, limned on glass, staring back at them,

all night so alone, apart from all of these,
the babies and the farmgirls and the geriatrics,
I feel more connected to them than ever
because I am afraid, and my fear has charged me,
because like the heavens that have burst

open for me on bright blinding hinges,
the hearts of the millions of strangers with whom
I share this planet and its oblivion have opened
as well, all at once, like a silent furnace,
ignorant of its many parts but not of its whole,

all night burning with unbearable heat
until the dawn, when even in summer,
even when I am not alone or vigilant,
even when the midnight sweats a tropic-black,
the sea wind must blow in cold, to cool me.

Nor am I singling out just one poem by one poet. The other poems in Nicholas Christopher's *A Short History of the Islands of Butterflies* are nearly all of the same cloth. And so are the poems of most of the rest of my random sample. Cornelius Eady, in "Dance at the Amherst County Public Library" (*Victims of the Latest Dance*

Craze, Lamont winner) establishes a persona who describes his poems as failures, but still a sort of dance. He hopes we will say, "Oh no, not failures. They *are* a dance." But we have to agree with him that good intentions for a dance may not dance. Compare the last stanzas of Eady's poem with the last stanza of Yeats' "Among School Children:"

DANCE AT THE AMHERST COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

. . .
This is how I wasted my time,
Trying to become the Henry Ford of poetry,
And mass produce a group of words
Into a thing which could shake
And be owned by the entire world.

Naturally, I failed.

Of course, even the failure was a sort of dance.

My friend,
I bequeath to you what I know:
Not the image of a high, glistening city
But the potential in tall grass, flattened
  by a summer's storm.
Not the dance
But the good intentions of a dance.

This was the world I belonged to,
With its symphony of near-misses,
And in its name
And in the names of all those omitted
I dance my small graffiti dance.

AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN

VIII

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Or consider Richard Jones' "The Horses" (*Country of Air*), which is clearly written in answer to James Wright's "A Blessing."

THE HORSES

The rain has come
and I cannot see the three horses
wandering in the pasture.
It's logical
to say they are still there,
huddled under the trees,
the rain turning to mist
as it falls through the branches.
I know nothing about horses
except that they will come back,
waiting for me by the fence,
bowing their sad and beautiful faces,
wanting to kiss my hand.
They stand all winter in silence.
It's like a dream I don't understand.
I walk outside and see,
as the rain turns to snow,

these slow lumbering horses
moving toward me,
the heavy walk
toward apples and sugar,
their heads hung low
with that miserable look
I somehow love
but have never loved enough.

A BLESSING

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

Jones answers Wright's poem by flattening it: it's raining; he can't see; "it's/logical to say they are still there." And just as Wright says, "Suddenly I realize/That if I stepped out of my body I would break/Into blossom," Jones replies, "but [I] have never loved enough."

The increase of traditional forms in much of this verse cannot be blamed for emotional numbness and perceptual linearity. After Donne or Frost or Stafford we know that metrics need never muffle a poet's intensity. But much of the rhyme and meter in these books is clumsy and interferes with a poem's movement and thus with its tone and meaning. For example, Timothy Steele (*Sapphics Against Anger: And Other Poems*) uses a metronome with heavy end rhyme whether he is "Shucking Corn," writing a "Chanson Philosophique," or waking to watch his lover dress. His rueful poem, "on the Eve of a Birthday," uses form successfully for comic effect. But in a poem like "Waiting for the Storm" a reflex adherence to tradition trivializes what might have been an ominous or at least an ambiguous moment.

WAITING FOR THE STORM

Breeze sent a wrinkling darkness
Across the bay. I knelt
Beneath an upturned boat,
And, moment by moment, felt

The sand at my feet grow colder,
The damp air chill and spread.
Then the first raindrops sounded
On the hull above my head.

Henri Cole (*The Marble Queen*) writes a forty-four-quatrain poem, "Midnight Sailing on the Chesapeake," which does its best to make the abab rhyme scheme flexible with slant rhyme and the basic tetrameter flexible with variations of pentameter and trimeter, but the result is often wooden. In the following excerpt the last line of stanza 1 is both trite and superfluous, apparently

to get one more line into the stanza and to find a rhyme for *ever*. The last phrase of the third stanza has the same problem: Why shouldn't the sun be swallowed "without a word"? The metaphor of sky as bell is just, but making the bell's tongue or clapper a compass is physically impossible, and going south would not seem to point to sunset, no matter how subtle and effective is the slant rhyme on *us*, *journey*, and *burning dusk*. Nor does the meter help the ship to move. Three end-stopped quatrains move more like hoofbeats than the lift and drop of sails filled by wind from behind, especially when two of those quatrains end on the sounds of *sk* and *d*.

MIDNIGHT SAILING ON THE CHESAPEAKE

. . .
The rudder churns a tilth of foam
rising in a wave behind us, ever
tracing our wanderlust from home,
our windy romantic endeavor.

We set out two days ago,
the sky a bell around us,
its tongue the compass for our journey
into the gulf, into the burning dusk.

In the first day's light we followed
the sun until she fell like a bird
across the pines, swallowed
in the August horizon without a word.
. . .

But it was especially when I read Volume 81 of The Yale Series of Younger Poets, George Bradley's *Terms To Be Met* that I grew most despondent. For it was in The Yale Series that we first met James Wright, Adrienne Rich, and John Ashbery. We remember their early poems first as experience. Only later, as an

aftertaste or reverberation, do we notice their implied comment on experience. Bradley's book, however, is primarily comment, on experiences derived most often from his reading of history or science, or generalized from repeated experiences or the fading memory of them. Compare Bradley's "M31 in Andromeda" with Miroslav's Holub's "Hominization" (*Interferon or On Theater*, FIELD Translation Series, v. 7, 1982).

M31 IN ANDROMEDA

To the naked eye, it is all but invisible, a pale patch
Of nebulous starlight among a host of greater luminaries,
But on close consideration, it assumes magnified significance,
Comprising constellations and their worlds of difference.
With the human talent for noticing much, explaining little,
Stellar Body M31 was long remarked for an odd imbalance,
Revolving in mysterious concert with its own dark motives.
The hidden motivation turns out to be ourselves, our Milky
Way,
And as matter may be defined by influence if not appearance,
The faint star became a galaxy, seen for what once it was.

What passes for present time there, across a gulf so vast
It can be bridged only by the lightning intangible of light,
We, here, have no way of knowing, but to us it appears
Extraordinarily beautiful, although it must be remembered
That beauty is in the eye and so in this case exists largely
In lenses, in the mirror images of scientific equipment.
The great gathering of light spins majestically in space,
Centrifugal force and the force of gravity conspiring
To yield configuration, an elegant ellipse, though why
To turn in emptiness, in absence of light or any warmth,
Should form anything is not easy to imagine, any more than
why
Our own thoughts and dreams should take shape out of
darkness.

The galaxy involves perhaps two hundred billion suns,
And it might reassure us, create some form of consolation,
That something so gigantic should seem so self-contained;
But the image comes at such remove that our quiet conclusions
Drop in the abyss of distance like stones in the wide sea.
Two million light-years out into space, back into time,
Far, far from us, the galaxy turns upon itself, and we,
As is our habit, have given it a name: Andromeda, a word
First given to that part of the sky by Greek astronomers,
Who thought the stars were bright reflections on themselves.

At a distance of what is, from our perspective, many years,
It is difficult now to separate whatever may once have
happened
From all that certainly did not, but it seems Andromeda
Was a woman so beautiful she was set out on a rock, bound
Beside the sea and with a sea of stars over her head,
There to satisfy something terrible, something that no one,
Not her father, who was king, nor her father's priests,
Nor we who read the tale, had any real hope of averting
Or could think to comprehend.

HOMINIZATION

Lucy,
blessed among women,
three million years ago,
when there were no legends,
just the loving search
for dandruff in fur,
was waiting for someone
on the shore of the lake,
no one came but death,
the appropriate death for the species
Australopithecus afarensis,

a four-foot death with a man's step
and a monkey's skull.

Lucy — excavated,
partly assumed into heaven,
after some filling with plaster,
the forgotten nursery rhyme,
eeny meeny miney moe —
is still waiting.

And so are we, maybe,
despite plaster shortages.
And so are we,
with Pliocene hopelessness,
on the shore of the lake.

And maybe they'll find us one day,
when people finally exist.

Both poems are speaking about mankind's inability to comprehend his species' place in the universe. Both suggest that the cause is the incompleteness, even the impossibility of significant evolution. But Holub describes a scene: Lucy (Australopithecus afarensis) waiting on the shore of a lake for someone who turns out to be death; then he places us on the same shore in the same condition of "Pliocene hopelessness." Only two lines suggest the beginning of a third scene, ". . . one day / when people finally exist." Because the first two scenes establish direction, Holub knows that his readers will have dim hopes that the species will ever reach that final stage of evolution. He doesn't have to explain why. All he has to say is, "Then. Now. Next?" to provoke a rueful laugh.

Bradley's poem puts the men who made the legend of Andromeda in the same relationship with contemporary astronomers as Holub put Lucy, and he points to a future equally bleak. But he does not introduce a scene, with human characters acting

in it, until after thirty-four lines of scientific data and philosophical reflection, in Latinate language and long, complex sentences, almost without metaphor and wholly without humor. To say that the legend was created ". . . to satisfy something terrible, something that no one,/Not her father, who was king, nor her father's priests,/Nor we who read the tale, had any hope of averting/Or could think to comprehend" does not create as quick or vivid or multiple a flash of realization as being dug out of Lucy's dry river bank by people who "finally exist."

Bradley's poems are clear, intelligent analyses of complex and important realizations. His prosody is impeccable and unobtrusively varied, even when he is writing shaped poems or inventing short stanza forms. What saddens is that such skill and intelligent effort should need to distance itself from the wound of living so badly that it must wrap a thick bandage:

LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

Here aboard
this crude shape sailing
through space, with impressions im-
pinging from all angles, like starlight, always
and all at once, and the lightyears from where we
stand to the limits of our understanding, the borders of
invisibility that put an end to our surmises, in all directions
roughly equidistant, although it doesn't appear so unconsid-
ered — the shape of our perceptions is spherical, and a good
thing, too. Perhaps it could be formulated empirically: Radius, or
Reach, is Intelligence by Persistence by Situation, but in any case
the form's just right, tough enough to take almost anything, re-
tentive and resistant and slipping through space on a path to a
cold end as inanimate mass, long into the future and many
circles from now, reflecting into darkness and trailing
wisps of atmosphere like the ambiance of lost days
that we require, that we are losing always,
our medium, our support, of us and
our definition.

Where are the Jacob's ladders that poets made us climb on our knees, the horses that poured us past tors, the skunks that dared us from cups of sour cream?

Alberta Turner

POETS AND THE HUMAN FAMILY

Etheridge Knight, THE ESSENTIAL ETHERIDGE KNIGHT (Pittsburgh, 1986)

Audre Lorde, OUR DEAD BEHIND US (Norton, 1986)

In *The Witness of Poetry*, from which I draw my title, Czeslaw Milosz talks of many important issues that concern us as readers and writers, and as citizens of the world as well, primary among them the chance to heal "our growing despair because of the discrepancy between reality and the desire of our hearts . . ." In almost religious terms, he looks beyond this despair to a poetry that will help us accept the world "with all its good and evil." Oppressed peoples and their poets are a good place to look for news of such a world, and our Black poets in particular seem unflinching in their commitment to honest reporting of the evil as well as the good, no matter where encountered. In a striking poem of some years ago, "Clap Hands, Here Comes the Lindbergh Baby," which goes beyond a rhetoric that can get in the way of carefully reporting disturbing events, the late Bob Kaufman worried about "eyes that have no history,/ eyes that darken brows,/ eyes that have no lids,/ eyes that never blink . . ." Had Kaufman lived (and broken a second vow of silence that he took in 1978), he would, I believe, still be struggling alongside his fellow poets to keep poems open to every voice, every last bit of knowledge of good and evil, but not at the expense of locking the poetry out of the poem.

Both Knight and Lorde, in their best work, are as gifted as poets can get, and so there is much to be thankful for in these new books, one of which (Knight's) collects substantial work over many years. Whatever the relative merits of poems, or books of poems, there is much in both these poets we'd never

want to do without, though we can always worry about the means.

Let us acknowledge a serious matter straight away: the many languages of poetry, both on the page as well as in the mind's ear, are a tricky business. Black poets have complained that many readers simply cannot "hear" — from a look at the page — what's fully going on in their poems, because, among other things, another discrete language, with its own musical structures, is involved. Add the way any poem can be presented by its author, or an authentic speaker who understands the text deeply, and the issue becomes even more complex — I'll never forget hearing Maya Angelou read some poems that did not interest me on the page. She fairly pulled me up by the ears, and returning to the texts, I realized I'd not fully heard them out, that indeed there was more to them than my eye had seen. Of course, this is pretty much true in general about everything we read, but I'm convinced that we who do not use Black idioms, or Black language(s) naturally, are particularly advised to suspend judgement until, as with a play that needs playing before the mind can take it all in, the right voice(s) can be summoned to represent the poem fairly.

I do not want to hedge — there are quite a few poems in both these books that most of us would agree, whatever our origins and training, are neither vintage Knight nor Lorde, nor memorable poetry, never mind the important subject matter at the core. Where they disappoint, their texts stay too simple, too monolithic, both in intent and in poetic strategy. But I recall someone once saying that poems are worth a few great lines or moments, and books a few memorable poems. There is enough of such residue in both collections under review here to allow us to say that the rest may have been necessary to turn up the best.

The strongest poems that move through Knight's book — like a line of thunderstorms — have a double eye, a double focus as it were: birth and ancestry seen now from the tiny window of prison, now from the huge window of the soul. "The Idea of Ancestry" deserves many readers:

THE IDEA OF ANCESTRY

1

Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black
faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grand-
fathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts,
cousins (1st & 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare
across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know
their dark eyes, they know mine. I know their style,
they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me;
they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.

I have at one time or another been in love with my mother,
1 grandmother, 2 sisters, 2 aunts (1 went to the asylum),
and 5 cousins. I am now in love with a 7-yr-old niece
(she sends me letters written in large block print, and
her picture is the only one that smiles at me).

I have the same name as 1 grandfather, 3 cousins, 3 nephews,
and 1 uncle. The uncle disappeared when he was 15, just took
off and caught a freight (they say). He's discussed each year
when the family has a reunion, he causes uneasiness in
the clan, he is an empty space. My father's mother, who is 93
and who keeps the Family Bible with everybody's birth dates
(and death dates) in it, always mentions him. There is no
place in her Bible for "whereabouts unknown."

2

Each fall the graves of my grandfathers call me, the brown
hills and red gullies of mississippi send out their electric
messages, galvanizing my genes. Last yr / like a salmon quitting
the cold ocean-leaping and bucking up his birthstream / I

hitchhiked my way from LA with 16 caps in my pocket and a
monkey on my back. And I almost kicked it with the kinfolks.
I walked barefooted in my grandmother's backyard / I smelled
the old

land and the woods / I sipped cornwhiskey from fruit jars with
the men /
I flirted with the women / I had a ball till the caps ran out
and my habit came down. That night I looked at my
grandmother
and split / my guts were screaming for junk / but I was almost
contented / I had almost caught up with me.
(The next day in Memphis I cracked a croaker's crib for a fix.)

This yr there is a gray stone wall damming my stream, and
when
the falling leaves stir my genes, I pace my cell or flop on my
bunk
and stare at 47 black faces across the space. I am all of them,
they are all of me, I am me, they are thee, and I have no
children
to float in the space between.

In place of the "normal" pin-ups in this situation, we're forced instead to see his family, and ourselves as well, in a sort of police line-up, where everyone might be everyone else, and the major matter's to see how long we can remember each, with specific details where urgent ("1 dead" — "both dead" — "1st and 2nd" — "I went to the asylum" — "she sends me letters written in large block print, and / her picture is the only one that smiles at me" — "they say" — "and death dates"); and the genealogy is committed to memory, kept alive by tracing it over and over, the mind urging itself to keep track of every bit and piece, the voice coming and coming. The sense of shame is also not lost, though not writ large, so that the nakedness, social and physical, while based on fear, is "under the eyes of God," as the Christian existentialist, Gabriel Marcel, might put it.

After the curtain (Part 1) has been raised, Part 2 shows us the life behind the lives, and the lament over not being able to catch up with oneself. What I especially admire is the transcendence of the confessional aspects, and the bald assumption that there, *because* of the grace of God, go all of us — we who've also

done some mighty dumb things and been spared, so far at least, everything but being able to fill the space between with children. This one lack keeps us pacing, staring over at those from whom we've come.

But then, lo and behold, in "Memphis — in Tennessee," a very particular city in a very particular state, Knight reminds us, it happens: a child is born:

ON THE BIRTH OF A BLACK / BABY / BOY
— for Isaac BuShie Blackburn-Knight

In Memphis — in Tennessee.
(O Come — and go / wid / meeee . . .)
In Memphis, in Tennessee —
In the year of (y) our Lord, 1978 —
(and the christian / suicides in Guyana).
In the bubbles and the blood of Boss Crump's guilt —
In the blueness of the hospitality of his / hos / pi / tal —
In the sterile gowns, green and growing —
In Memphis, in Tennessee . . .

Where all women / are / whining Queens,
Where black walnuts drop like leaves,
Where all women / are / shining Queens —
Where / cops / act / much worse than thieves —
In Memphis, in Tennessee . . .

When / the blood of your birth / is / screaming forth
like a fountain
from
the white thighs of your mother —
When / her / hand / is tight on mine —

When I sink in / side her belly, and cling to / you —
When / short miles to the south the Ku Klux / Klan
march like locusts over / this / land —

When mayors / like Moscone / are / shot-down, like
Martin, Malcolm, and Medgar Evers —
When Jimmy Carter / tries / to *stand* where Martin *stood*
In Memphis, in Tennessee — And.

As the lady / medic / with her long black hair
taunts your mother: O push push push *push* —

As / my / belly / becomes a drum and my blood beseech thee —
As / my / heart / becomes a song and my eyes lakes of
lightning.
As / your / mother grunts for 3 / days and groans for 3 / nights,
As / she issues you / forth on a sunday night,
(on a chilling, raining, sun / day / night) —
and now.
As you lay warming in my arms, son —
all I / can / say is:
You / be a loonngg time coming, boy —
But you're wel / come here.

November-December 1978

In plain song, at his best, Knight does what few would be willing to risk, here. One is reminded of Philip Levine's splendid achievement in "They Feed They Lion," with its more forcefully syncopated, split and sundered version of psalm crossbred with spiritual, but Knight is rightly content to let us recognize and rehearse every "fact," every "event," public and personal, public through personal, in the click-click-click of the poem's camera through recent history. The collective organizing force of "In," "Where," "When," and "As" is enough to keep our eye and ear on what matters most: the *coming*, however *loonngg* it takes. But it is still *well to come*, if I may play, because in spite of the most frightening moment/word in the poem ("*And*" — "In Memphis, in Tennessee — And."), this poet can accept and offer and urge as little as, "all I / can / say is:" — and by stuttering it so, give up on his own version of history in the face of new life.

In a touching poem near the end of the book, Knight is also not above reminding us, through his friendship and kinship with Galway Kinnell, that "THE PEOPLES can be a bitch" and that our songs of love may not be enough:

A POEM TO GALWAY KINNELL

Saturday, April 26, 1973
Jefferson, Missouri 65101
(500 yards, as the crow flies,
from where I am writing you
this letter, lies the Missouri
State Prison — it lies, the prison,
like an overfed bear alongside
the raging missouri river —
the pale prison, out of which
sonny liston, with clenched fist,
fought his way, out of which,
james earl ray ripped his way
into the hearts of us all . . .)

dear galway,
it is flooding here, in missouri,
the lowlands are all under water and at night
the lights dance on the dark water,
our president, of late of watergate,
is spozed to fly above the flooded areas
and estimate how much damage has been done
to THE PEOPLES . . .

dear galway,
it is lonely here, and sometimes,
THE PEOPLES can be a bitch

dear galway,
i hear poems in my head
as the wind blows in your hair

and the young brown girl
with the toothpaste smile
who flows freely because she has heard OUR
SOUNDS. . .

dear galway,
OUR SONGS OF LOVE are still
murmurs among these melodies of madness . . .
dear galway, and what the fuck are the irish doing /
and when the IRA sends JUST ONE, just one soldier
to fight with say the American Indians, then i'll believe
them . . .

dear galway,
the river is rising here, and i am
scared and lonely . . .

Mary and the children send their love
to you and yours
always

Etheridge Knight

There's one offensive moment in this poem (just as there is in "On the Birth of a Black / Baby / Boy" — it's hard not to suspect Knight's meaning, when he refers to all women as, first, "whining Queens," then, "shining Queens," is an implied put-down of women when they most need our understanding and sympathy): that "young brown girl / with the toothpaste smile / who flows freely because she has heard OUR SOUNDS" is at best too easy and at worst a sort of violation of her — all too reminiscent of the way young girls seem to get conjured up in boys' verses. But that aside, the poem does manage to continue with Knight's major contribution: expanding our sometimes limited sense of how public concerns can be made a part of the fabric of intimate lyrical gestures. It is good to confess our fear and our loneliness while we take on the world's evils injunctively — that is a way of pre-

serving our humanity. To turn Knight's words back on him, then we'll believe him . . .

In her own way, Audre Lorde doesn't want to forget, either, though in a post-Adrienne Rich sort of tactic (whose "When We Dead Awaken" has called us to renewed attention) she can both acknowledge who's dead and why, and also help us put "Our Dead Behind Us" — where, visited by our memories, they back us up. In one of the most moving, most complete, and least managed poems in the collection, Lorde finds new meaning in woman-to-woman (or person-to-person) *and* black-to-white relationships. Before you read on, remember the last time you thought, or even merely pretended, you were as close as possible to an "other," woman-to-woman, or man-to-man, *and* black-white together:

OUTLINES

I
What hue lies in the slit of anger
ample and pure as night
what color the channel
blood comes through?

A Black woman and a white woman
charter our courses close
in a sea of calculated distance
warned away by reefs of hidden anger
histories rallied against us
the friendly face of cheap alliance.

Jonquils through the Mississippi snow
you entered my vision
with the force of hurled rock
defended by distance and a warning smile
fossil tears pitched over the heart's wall
for protection
no other women

grown beyond safety
come back to tell us
whispering
past the turned shoulders
of our closest
we were not the first
Black woman white woman
altering course to fit our own journey.

In this treacherous sea
even the act of turning

is almost fatally difficult
coming around full face
into a driving storm
putting an end to running
before the wind.

On a helix of white
the letting of blood
the face of my love
and rage
coiled in my brown arms
an ache in the bone
we cannot alter history
by ignoring it
nor the contradictions
who we are.

II
A Black woman and a white woman
in the open fact of our loving
with not only our enemies' hands
raised against us
means a gradual sacrifice
of all that is simple

dreams
where you walk the mountain
still as a water-spirit
your arms lined with scalpels
and I hide the strength of my hungers
like a throwing knife in my hair.

Guilt wove through quarrels like barbed wire
fights in the half-forgotten schoolyard
gob of spit in a childhood street
yet both our mothers once scrubbed kitchens
in houses where comfortable women
died a separate silence
our mothers' nightmares
trapped into familiar hatred
the convenience of others drilled into their lives
like studding into a wall
they taught us to understand
only the strangeness of men.

To give but not beyond what is wanted
to speak as well as to bear
the weight of hearing
Fragments of the word wrong
clung to my lashes like ice
confusing my vision with a crazed brilliance
your face distorted into grids
of magnified complaint
our first winter
we made a home outside of symbol
learned to drain the expansion tank together
to look beyond the agreed-upon disguises
not to cry each other's tears.

How many Februarys
shall I lime this acid soil
inch by inch

reclaimed through our gathered waste?
from the wild onion shoots of April
to mulch in the August sun
squash blossoms a cement driveway
kale and tomatoes
muscles etch the difference
between I need and forever.

When we first met
I had never been
for a walk in the woods.

III
light catches two women on a trail
together embattled by choice
carving an agenda with tempered lightning
and no certainties
we mark tomorrow
examining every cell of the past
for what is useful stoked by furies
we were supposed to absorb by forty
still we grow more precise with each usage
like falling stars or torches
we print code names upon the scars
over each other's resolutions
our weaknesses no longer hateful.

When women make love
beyond the first exploration
we meet each other knowing
in a landscape
the rest of our lives
attempts to understand.

IV
Leaf-dappled the windows lighten
after a battle that leaves our night in tatters

and we two glad to be alive and tender
the outline of your ear pressed on my shoulder
keeps a broken dish from becoming always.

We rise to dogshit dumped on our front porch
the brass windchimes from Sundance stolen
despair offerings of the 8 A.M. News

reminding us we are still at war
and not with each other
"give us 22 minutes and we will give you the world . . ."
and still we dare
to say we are committed
sometimes without relish.

Ten blocks down the street
a cross is burning
we are a Black woman and a white woman
with two Black children
you talk with our next-door neighbors
I register for a shotgun
we secure the tender perennials
against an early frost
reconstructuring a future we fuel
from our living different precisions

In the next room a canvas chair
whispers beneath your weight
a breath of you between laundered towels
the flinty places that do not give.

V
Your face upon my shoulder
a crescent of freckle over bone
what we share illuminates what we do not
the rest is a burden of history

we challenge
bearing each bitter piece to the light
we hone ourselves upon each other's courage
loving
as we cross the mined bridge fury
turned like a Geiger counter

to the softest place.

One straight light hair on the washbasin's rim
difference
intimate as a borrowed scarf
the children arrogant as mirrors
our pillows' mingled scent
this grain of our particular days
keeps a fine sharp edge
to which I cling like a banner
in a choice of winds
seeking an emotional language
in which to abbreviate time.

I trace the curve of your jaw
with a lover's finger
knowing the hardest battle
is only the first
how to do what we need for our living
with honor and in love
we have chosen each other
and the edge of each other's battles
the war is the same
if we lose
someday women's blood will congeal
upon a dead planet
if we win
there is no telling.

I don't want to do without this poem, though I admit to feeling impatient with some rhetoric, some sermonizing, some leaving it old (as opposed to making it new), some sentimentalizing, and even some less than wise pronouncing. What I do welcome is the attitude of the poem, and the way it does not anticipate my reactions and try to outmaneuver me morally — in short it stays within the "outlines" of the relationship of these and only these two women. And as good outlines can, it offers enough room for me as reader, and indeed as male reader, to adduce my own concerns about how I live with my own most difficult friends across the lines of race and sex.

If you do nothing else, find someone, not necessarily a Black if you are white, or a White, if you are black (though that might help), to read this poem to you. I submit you'll not only accept the more clumsy moments, you will actually embrace them, even require them, as you go about making room beyond the excessive matters between humans for the most lyrical, quietest, most surprising moments in the poem, such as, to give only one tiny example:

> the outline of your ear pressed on my shoulder
> keeps a broken dish from becoming always.

This is what I'd call a perfect American sentence — that slides past English, or American-English diction (one is reminded, perhaps, of Auden, or even Edna St. Vincent Millay!?), into a cosier place, from which it will always be possible to "rise to dogshit / dumped on our front porch." But here I rush past locating the poem as a whole to the sensory place Lorde made of this phrase when she read the poem at Oberlin a while ago. Let me retreat — we relearn old things from this poem as a whole, as indeed we should from all good poems: from the mundane (that it is possible never to have been for a walk in the woods until someone you love suggests it as a way past your conflict); to the definite (that we were not the first to do anything, and never will be); to the paradoxical (that our fury, no matter the circumstances, must be

"turned like a Geiger counter / to the softest place"); to the ultimate (that, as an old Chinese proverb has it, God has given us one face, but we make another ourselves). The light in the dark we live in is enough to trace the other by, and, as Henry James says somewhere, "Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art." Madness, because it is not foolish to journey this way:

FROM THE CAVE

Last night an old man warned me
to mend my clothes
we would journey before light
into a foreign tongue.
I rode down autumn
mounted on a syllabus
through stairwells hung in dog
and typewriter covers
the ocean is rising
father
I came on time
and the waters touched me.

A woman I love
draws me
a bath of old roses.

If you come on time, Lorde knows, the waters will indeed touch you. Not necessarily in a form you'd expect, but who wouldn't want "a bath of old roses" for once?

Stuart Friebert

THE NATURALIZING OF SURREALISM

Robert Bly, SELECTED POEMS (Harper & Row, 1986)

Charles Simic, UNENDING BLUES (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986)

James Tate, RECKONER (Wesleyan, 1986)

Thomas Lux, HALF PROMISED LAND (Houghton Mifflin, 1986)

Sometime in the nineteen-sixties, surrealism seems to have entered the bloodstream of American literature in a more or less permanent way. It has now become such a common feature of our poetry, as a mode of discourse and a source of metaphor, that when we see it in a poet's work we do not so much think he or she has been reading (or raiding) French literature, but rather tend to recognize a variation on a native theme. The poets who have surrealist elements in their vocabularies are much more likely to be indebted to each other than to Desnos, Breton, Peret, or to the Spanish and South American poets who naturalized surrealism in their own languages and cultures in the thirties, forties and fifties. The North American assimilation of surrealism has on the whole been healthy, I believe. Ours is an eclectic culture, like it or not, and this is one demonstration of that fact.

Definitions of isms are tricky. Most of us feel that we can recognize surrealism when in its presence, and we suffer its adulteration willingly, not clinging to the purity of purpose or the militant features that characterized the original movement. What we are apt to label surrealism is the refusal to distinguish between inner and outer lives, the assertion of the copresence of conscious and unconscious thoughts, of dream world and waking world. The close kinship with expressionism is obvious. Both isms attack the norms of objective reality and argue for the large and unchartable role of the self in perception and behavior. Both tend to celebrate subjectivity rather than reject it. Their implicit challenge is partly to materialism and positivism, partly to literary realism, and partly to attempts to hold art in a subordinate

position, responsible to social and political norms. When surrealism is truly effective, it alters our sense of human experience and opens our senses and imaginations to fresh perspectives. It also, often, provokes a kind of wild laughter, the sort that recognizes the presence of the subversive, the revolutionary, the impermissible; one might call it carnivalesque. When surrealism fails it seems forced, ponderously whimsical, an attempt at spontaneity that produces the opposite effect.

If surrealism was finally assimilated into our literary culture in the sixties, it did not approach from a single source or direction. The Beat poets were interested in it. So were the New York poets, from whose midst emerged the formidable John Ashbery. W. S. Merwin changed his style to accommodate French influences, and surrealism was clearly among them. Russell Edson was soon to develop his remarkable prose poems. And in the Middle West Robert Bly and James Wright, as the decade began, were fashioning a new kind of lyric that was emphatically regional in effect but wildly international in its resources. Among the influences they invoked in shaping this new kind of poem was surrealism, particularly Spanish surrealism, and expressionism, particularly of the German sort exemplified by Trakl.

The appearance of Robert Bly's *Selected Poems* this year helps remind us of that era, and its importance. It also allows us to see what has become of the surrealist influence in Bly's own work in the twenty-five or so years since. The verdict, I think, must be a mixed one. Bly's influence on other poets and his own originality deserve generous acknowledgement. The forced and uneven quality of much of his poetry must also be recognized. What Bly and Wright and others loosely associated with them (Simpson, Haines, Dickey, Kinnell, Hall) accomplished surely meant, among other things, that surrealism would be a more natural and native possibility for the poets who followed them. They broke the ground and showed the way. The effort, however, had its costly side. Bly's is a muse who often seems to be dragging his poems into existence with a strained face and gritted teeth.

The midwestern lyric that Bly helped invent is a fascinating creature. In its deliberate movement, neutral music, and flat-

tened manner, it replicates many of the qualities of the life and landscape from which it comes. It is bleak, seldom playful, and is characterized by a sense of wonder at large open spaces and essential human solitude. The primary model is the Chinese lyric. The distinctive seasonings are the dashes of expressionist and surrealistic imagery, the "deep images" that investigate a dream life lying below the matter-of-fact surface. Here is an example of the genre as practiced by Bly, chosen at random from the appropriate section of *The Selected Poems*:

CORNPICKER POEM

I

Sheds left out in the darkness,
Abandoned granaries, cats merging into the night.

There are hubcaps cooling in the dark yard.

The stiff-haired son has slouched in
And gone to bed.
A low wind sweeps over the moony land.

II

Overshoes stiffen in the entry.
The calendar grows rigid on the wall.

He dreams, and his body grows limber.
He is fighting a many-armed woman;
He is a struggler, he will not yield.
He fights her in the crotch of a willow tree.

He wakes up with jaws set,
And a victory.

III
It is dawn. Cornpicking today.
He leans over, hurtling
His old Pontiac down the road.

Somewhere the sullen chilled machine
Is waiting, its empty gas cans around it.

This is not Bly at his early best, but it is characteristic enough to be a useful example of the genre. The surrealist elements are embedded in the poem's central section, but they are intended to radiate, working their influence on the first and last sections as well, so that the young farmer's dream life, fighting a mother goddess, will pervade our sense of the granaries and hubcaps and empty gas cans that are the outward features of his existence. The tone is rather bleak, but the effect can be exhilarating. I still recall the excitement with which I first encountered these flat, hard-bitten little poems that combined old tires and weathered boards and rusting farm machinery with the exotic possibilities of Chinese and European poetics. At the same time, I think it has to be said that "Cornpicker Poem" now feels a bit lame and programmatic. Its structure is dangerously obvious and its flat lines dangerously wooden. The copresence of a mythic (Jungian and Freudian) dream-life with a dreary farm existence is insisted on but never quite manages to be convincing; the connections (e.g. the stiffness and rigidity of everything) feel forced. In the best of his early lyrics, Bly has a lighter touch and a more complex tone, a kind of giddy letting go that takes over from the theoretical commitments and the preachy manner and scatters the poem into amazement and joy. The same kind of thing occurs in the best moments of James Wright's *The Branch Will Not Break*. These lyrics achieved something distinctive and memorable, and it was surely aided by their openness to the aesthetic of surrealism. But their limitations are clearer over time, and the truly successful examples fewer than one had hoped.

Not to linger on Bly's subsequent achievements, which I find

rather disappointing in the aggregate, let me cite another lyric, again chosen at random, from his recent book of love poems, *Loving a Woman in Two Worlds*:

CONVERSATION WITH A HOLY WOMAN NOT SEEN FOR MANY YEARS

After so many years, I come walking to you.
You say: "You have come after so long?"
I could not come earlier. My shabby mouth,
with its cavernous thirst, ate the seeds of longing
that should have been planted. Awkward and baffled,
dishonest, I slept. And I dreamt of sand.
Your eyes in sorrow do not laugh.
I say, "I have come after so many years."

The less said about this, the better, I should think. There is something pompous about it, something threadbare. The surrealist elements are still present, in the form of an image or two and a dream experience. But they do little to give the poem energy or insight. Instead, conceptual elements of the kind Bly has always roundly condemned in the work of others tend to govern the piece — "Awkward and baffled, / dishonest, I slept" — and the repetitions are just painful. How much less the poet is now willing to settle for! One turns back from this sort of thing, to the earlier poems and prose poems, or looks forward, hopefully, to a resurgence of lyric strength in Bly's next phase. My use of random sampling has not been kind to this poet. If all poems are in some sense self-portraits, neither of these is as flattering to him as his best work. But the chance selection reveals the unevenness, which must be recognized and acknowledged. The poems should have been more rigorously selected. The example that this poet set as a serious student of surrealist poetics remains historically important and remarkably influential without, in practice, giving rise to very many successful poems. One wishes better for him, and from him.

* * *

Charles Simic's sense of surrealism comes as naturally to him as his wry wit, his fascination with history, and his compassion. Perhaps he represents what Bly made possible, but the contrast is so pronounced that we may be more apt to think of them as opposite possibilities in the native practice of surrealism. Simic, of course, has his East European background and a lifelong sympathy for the modernism that was in great part nurtured in France and represented by the surrealist movement, among others. He also has a deep interest in folklore, which has always had its own surrealistic tinge. But finally he's an American poet whose surrealism is as domestic and unselfconscious as one could wish. He inhabits the world of Beckett and Kafka, but he is also of the generation of Donald Barthelme and Red Grooms:

ANCIENT ENGINES AND BEASTS

A very old horse in an old people's home.
(That's the way it looks.) Someone
Ought to ride him while the nurses
Bathe the dying. Someone tall and gaunt
Like Don Quixote. Perhaps even
With a wide-brimmed black hat to greet
The poplars twisting in the wind.
(That's the way it looks.) In the rain
They won't hear its hooves. The rider
With a pointy gray beard next to a tower
Of rusted cars. I want him to wade
Into that wide nightlike river. Smokestacks
On the other bank. Smoke billowing.
The horse asleep as he stands in the rain.
A tall rider in a pale hospital shirt
Placing his hand over his heart.
The writing on the warehouse wall calling:
Tabu. Sphinx. Solus. Maria Dolores.

What is surreal here? Everything and nothing, one might reply. The poem does not contort language to disorient our sense of the

normal, nor does it use extravagant metaphors to signal the presence of unconscious meanings. Structurally, it feels no need to move from outer world to inner world and back, the way Bly's "Cornpicker Poem" does. It presents dream and reality, outer life and inner life, simultaneously and seamlessly. It also melds its traditions — European surrealism as represented by one of its great forebears, Cervantes, and American surreality as represented by the towers of rusted cars and graffiti-marked warehouses, not to mention the old people's home and its remarkable denizens. I'm not altogether convinced that the words in the last line are precisely the ones the poem needs for successful closure, but I love the parenthetical refrain and the way the narrator erects the whole poem — picture, one might say, thinking of Goya or some American equivalent — on a shaky scaffold of pure speculation. Simic doesn't need to force anything to happen. He's the most casual of conjurors. Sometimes he may be too relaxed, with the result that poems dissipate their initial energies in whimsical invention (e.g., "Henri Rousseau's Bed"), but his use of surrealism feels so natural and right that one can only rejoice in it.

Much of this new collection is very sardonic. We smile, but we sense its bitterness and anger at the course of history and its incalculable cost in human suffering. Poems like "Toward Nightfall" and "History," and titles like "Ever So Tragic" may insist too much on their dark vision. But Simic can and does back off into sheer fun and into what I'll risk calling tenderness. Both impulses check the cynicism and complement it. The first tends to draw on the international mode that Simic has compounded from the tradition of painters like Breughel and Bosch and writers like Rabelais and Calvino:

> I went down the tree-lined street of false gods
> The cobbled street of two wise monkeys
> The street of roasted nightingales
> The small twisted street of the insomniacs
> The street of those who feather their beds. . .
> ("The Marvels of the City")

The history of human error and defeat fills this poem, and nobody will confuse this city with, say, Cincinnati. But the playful side of both surrealism and of allegorical moralism is uppermost here, and that Simic has always offered his readers such invention and delight is neither to be overlooked nor taken for granted. The other end of the scale is much more native and minimalist:

Windy evening,
Chinablue snow,
The old people are shivering
In their kitchens.

Truck without lights
Idling on the highway,
Is it a driver you require?
Wait a bit.

("Dark Farmhouses")

Among these extremes of stylistic opulence and understatement, dazzling wit and quiet compassion, international postmodernism and national experience, Simic moves like an expert stage manager and scene changer. He's in his artistic prime, and we should be grateful to have him in our midst. As for his surrealism, it is so much a part of his sensibility and repertoire that we can scarcely hope to isolate it. Where does it appear in the following poem? Isn't the answer once again something like "everywhere and nowhere"?

PROMISES OF LENIENCY AND FORGIVENESS

Orphanage in the rain,
Empty opera house with its lights dimmed,
Thieves' market closed for the day,
O evening sky with your cloudy tableaus!

Incurable romantics marrying eternal grumblers.
Life haunted by its more beautiful sister-life —

Always, always . . . we had nothing
But the way with words. Someone rising to eloquence

After a funeral, or in the naked arms of a woman
Who has her head averted because she's crying,
And doesn't know why. Some hairline fracture of the soul
Because of these razor-backed hills, bare trees and bushes,

Sea-blackened rocks inscrutable as card players . . .
One spoke then of the structure of the inquirer himself,
Of blues in my bread, of great works and little faith.
Above the clouds the firm No went on pacing.

The woman had a tiny smile and an open umbrella,
Since now it had started to rain in a whisper,
The kind of rain that must have whispered in some other life
Of which we know nothing anymore except

That someone kept watching it come down softly,
Already soot-colored to make them think of
Serious children at play, and of balls of lint in a dark dark
corner
Like wigs, fright wigs for the infinite.

What an impressive range and mastery the reader finds in this catalogue of hopes and miseries and types and odd details! How often it is evening in a Charles Simic poem; how often it is raining or about to rain! What fun there is to be had, and yet how sad it all is. It seems completely new, and yet we have been here before. All these things really do belong together. This is a place that is both as foreign as a Flemish landscape, full of fools and maniacs, and as familiar as the neighborhood we grew up in. If this is surrealism, to paraphrase someone in Shakespeare, let it be an art lawful as eating!

* * *

It can be argued that James Tate is a truer or more dedicated surrealist than either Bly or Simic. Bly is surrealist at the level of subject; Simic carries surrealism as part of his native vision and lets it interact continuously between subject and figurative response. But Tate begins at the level of language, of our first encounter with the poem. Surrealist practice is for him a matter of diction and syntax too, a refusal to allow norms to prevail as long as the possibility for displacement, a changed reality, lurks in the very medium itself. In this respect he is somewhat like John Ashbery, who quite rightly praises Tate's new collection, *Reckoner*, as "dazzling." Ashbery himself somehow received the official sanction of cultural acceptance a few years ago, shifting from a marginal status to a central one, acknowledged as one of our best living poets. His good luck hasn't rubbed off on poets who resemble him, and one might feel the injustice of Tate's position if it weren't for the fact that commitment to what is still a radical and experimental poetics is probably better off at the margin than in the center. I suspect that Tate's work will remain something of a private cult for a long time, with its passionate admirers and its passionate detractors and a literary establishment, lumbering slowly into the sunset, that simply ignores it. That it may be inconsistent for that establishment to embrace Ashbery and neglect Tate is hardly startling. There's little or no coherence in these matters, and we probably shouldn't wring our hands over it.

One problem that Tate has faced, given his early commitment to surrealism and his early success at it, is development. Where do you go with a style so firmly cast and a poetics so securely based? It is a problem that Russell Edson has faced as well. Abandoning one's values or exchanging them for a new set does not seem to be an answer. That, I think, is shown by the recent work of Greg Orr, who began in a surrealist mode and has largely abandoned it. The change may eventually prove to have a good shift for him, but it is not confirmed by *We Must Make a Kingdom of It*, his newest collection. In any case, Tate has always been somewhat the same, and if there are easy ways to tell early and middle

Tate from later Tate, I haven't discovered them. I only know that I like his new collection, that I enjoy it more in small doses than in large ones, probably because of its intensity and a certain sameness of effect, and that some poems work much better for me than others. I presume that Tate knows he risks erratic responses and uneven results, and that he does so gladly. Traditional literary touchstones, like the development of the poet and the pursuit of immortality through progressive excellence are presumably as suspect and leaden to him as standardized uses of poetic language and form. He is a free spirit, with all the advantages and disadvantages that go with that choice, and for a free spirit he is aging very gracefully.

I will give an example of a poem I respect without caring very much for, to show what I consider the less successful side of Tate's work in *Reckoner*, and then one I like quite a lot, showing him at what I take to be his current best. Other readers may well have opposite reactions. This is volatile stuff, and one comments on it gingerly, aware that one may be missing the point even in the act of judging or interpreting it:

A BEER AIN'T GOT NO BONE

I can't pick up the vacuum cleaner
without remembering our most subtle
and tender moments, shooing the sniper
from the playground, then picking watermelons.
For the past few months my life has read
like canned-food labels caked with panic.
I don't know if she's still in Tokyo
or on her way to Zanzibar. I am throwing
snowballs at the roadmap, I have placed
a thumbtack in the bluish hideaway
of her portrait.

I wonder if she thinks
about me at all. As I lie in bed dreaming

about her, a mouse is playing with a model airplane.
I could see the resemblance to her disorder;
in a downpour of thistles I could not forget her,
her absence lashed! My wife desisted,
an amphibian pulling anchor. Home,
the piddling copper tubing, the soap,
the grapefruit asks about her.
The syrup and ice trays have asked about her.
Without her, the cabaret is not so rosy,
falters before the greenery of life.

This uses the general zone of the love poem to play zestfully with language and literature, exploring the weird textures experience often affords us. Insofar as it succeeds, we may feel that it truly manages to give fresh meanings to a familiar theme. Insofar as it fails, we may sense it straining forward, from one arbitrary choice to another. Our uncertainty about the method of composition — how much randomness was used, how much actual experience does it reflect? — is probably functional to the poet's purpose: he doesn't want us to be sure when we are encountering words used for their own expressive sakes, like the paint thrown on a canvas by an action painter, and when we are dealing with referentiality. That a shifting combination of the two is present is just about our only certainty. A similar incertitude reigns in Ashbery's work, though it is handled more plangently and resonantly, and seems to resist interpretive forays less vigorously. To me, this poem sometimes seems frantically inventive, as in the last three sentences of the first stanza, and sometimes quite authoritative, as in the sentence, "As I lie in bed dreaming / about her, a mouse is playing with a model airplane." That may have its source in a children's book, a picture, an actual event, a dream, play with sound or some other means of association, but in its deflection of emotion and change of scale it projects a sense of rightness in the form of a kind of wacky charm. A true Tate enthusiast would find more to cite and admire in this poem, I think — the nifty first sentence, for example — but would probably not

want to go much further interpretively than I've gone. Tate's admirers, detractors, and middle-of-the-roaders like myself must all rely on instinctive response as a means of judgment. That is the territory he has given us, and we venture beyond it at our peril.

A poem that seems to me to succeed more consistently and perhaps to represent a slight shift in Tate's work, is "Neighbors":

NEIGHBORS

Will they have children? Will they have more children?
Exactly what is their position on dogs? Large or small?
Chained or running free? Is the wife smarter than the man?
Is she older? Will this cause problems down the line?
Will he be promoted? If not, will this cause marital stress?
Does his family approve of her, and vice versa? How do
they handle the whole inlaw situation? Is it causing some
discord already? If she goes back to work, can he fix
his own dinner? Is his endless working about the yard
and puttering with rain gutters really just a pretext
for avoiding the problems inside the house? Do they still
have sex? Do they satisfy one another? Would he like to
have more, would she? Can they talk about their problems?
In their most private fantasies, how would each of them
change their lives? And what do they think of us, as neighbors,
as people? They are certainly cordial to us, painfully
polite when we chance-encounter one another at the roadside
mailboxes — but then, like opposite magnets, we lunge
    backward,
back into our own deep root systems, darkness and lust
strangling any living thing to quench our thirst and nourish
our helplessly solitary lives. And we love our neighborhood
for giving us this precious opportunity, and we love our dogs,
our children, our husbands and wives. It's just all so damned
difficult!

I really like the way this mirrors so many aspects of our culture, especially the combination of soap opera and self-help we use in groping through our difficult lives. Like most good humor, it is quite painful, and the writer, by his choice of pronoun, generously and sensibly includes himself in the catalogue of anxiety and distrust. Being a neighbor, spying and speculating, is an area of experience everyone can share in, and a metaphor that grows in capacity as the poem reaches its memorable climax. The cascade of questions stops at just the right point, I think, and gives way to a deepening reflectiveness. Tate here seems to me willing to risk a profundity he carefully avoids in his zanier pieces. I like that, and wish he would write more poems of this kind.

And is "Neighbors" less surrealistic than "A Beer Ain't Got No Bone," in which case I may be arguing that Tate is better when he gets away from his surrealist agenda? That is one possible reaction, but I feel I'm saying something more about my preferences among the ways Tate handles language and structure. I like him when he stays with his subject and keeps his language from being too show-offy. Other poems of that kind — "Storm," "A Wedding" — confirm that playing by such rules need not reduce the surrealism.

* * *

Thomas Lux's new collection, *Half Promised Land*, opens with a poem about a milkman and his son, throwing chipped milk bottles away on a winter dump. To entertain the son, the father throws one bottle up, then shatters it with another. He does this again and again, till the "drifted / junk tips its hats / of snow" in appreciation. Surrealism? No, autobiography, or so we gather from the dedication to the poet's father and the poem's close. Yet the scene is clearly one that appeals to an imagination trained by an appreciation of the surrealist tradition, finding the appeal of the surreal in poetry and in life. Like Simic, Lux integrates his interest in this tradition with the possibilities offered by subject and metaphor, just as poets have always done. Surrealism is in

his bloodstream, so to speak, in the corner of his eye, never very far away but never leading the poet or the poem down prescribed paths and into formulaic gestures.

Lux is a poet of charm, wit and generosity. He shows us a world of pain and absurdity that is frequently redeemed, in his eyes, by human courage and sheer impudence. A town is flooded, so the father of the family goes to work in a rowboat. Someone gets a whiff of another world and decides "to stay with the stench / of the present." His surrealism, when it surfaces, comes directly from life's absurdities, sometimes cruel or painful, sometimes delightful, or it comes through his figures of speech, as in the ambitious and moving long poem, "Triptych, Middle Panel Burning," which closes with an image of light displacing darkness because the darkness disperses "with a purpose — like drops / of blood borne off a battlefield / on the backs of ants, and following: rain, rain."

Lux's experiments can be fairly unrewarding at times. He sometimes forces language into novelty without really achieving precision: the milkman poem mentions "splints of glass" from the shattered bottles; a poem about poverty speaks of "shards of bread." These misuses may be deliberate, and the displacement they effect is minor next to Tate's experiments, but I often find them irritating rather than refreshing. Similarly, I sometimes feel that Lux drives his poems into contortions and extensions that make them feel forced, and that he is capable of considerable sentimentality, especially in the vicinity of children: see "Sleep for Bears," for example. Still, this poet can dance and sing with the best of them, and his surrealism often proves, on closer inspection, to have a firmer basis in reality than we thought. The most surrealistic moment in the following poem, for instance, may well be its title:

TARANTULAS ON THE LIFEBUOY

For some semitropical reason
when the rains fall
relentlessly they fall

into swimming pools, these otherwise
bright and scary
arachnids. They can swim
a little, but not for long

and they can't climb the ladder out.
They usually drown — but
if you want their favor,
if you believe there is justice,
a reward for not loving

the death of ugly
and even dangerous (the eel, hog snake,
rats) creatures, if

you believe these things, then
you would leave a lifebuoy
or two in your swimming pool at night.

And in the morning
you would haul ashore
the huddled, hairy survivors

and escort them
back to the bush, and know,
be assured that at least these saved,
as individuals, would not turn up

again someday
in your hat, drawer,
or the tangled underworld

of your socks, and that even —
when your belief in justice
merges with your belief in dreams —
they may tell the others

in a sign language
four times as subtle
and complicated as man's

that you are good,
that you love them,
that you would save them again.

This is Lux at his most delightful. If it sails close to the wind in risking sentimentality, it does not capsize, as some of James Wright's poems about insects and animals seem to do. Its wit and sure movement keep it upright. Even the syntax is witty, and the deft touches of self-mockery — the underworld of socks and the imagined sign language in which tarantulas communicate — give the poem a complex tone and a fine sense of balance. It argues for compassion and teases the rhetoric of that compassion, its soft underbelly of sentiment, at the same time. And if a surreal sense of experience suffuses it, then we have one more demonstration of the value that the surrealist tradition has assumed in our poetry as we move through the eighties.

* * *

I had thought of calling this piece "The Domestication of Surrealism." That sounds, finally, too critical, though it does acknowledge that a price is paid when a subversive, even revolutionary attitude, is diluted by its absorption into the cultural mainstream. Still, on balance, I would argue strongly that surrealism has done more good than harm to American poetry, and that its naturalizing was both inevitable and welcome. I hope I have not suggested that there is only one way to react to it or make use of it. If Simic is the best of these four poets, that is not necessarily because he has the best sense of how to use or not use surrealism; he may use it best because he's the best poet. Finally, though, I think all four of these poets are stronger and more interesting for the way that their work reflects the influence of the

surrealist movement, and that their problems, such as they are, cannot necessarily be traced to a misuse of surrealism. Others may draw different conclusions. I hope I have allowed for that. Certitude would be inimical, I think, to the spirit in which these poets should be read, criticized, and admired.

David Young

FRESHER VOICES

Deborah Digges, VESPER SPARROWS (Atheneum, 1986)

Chase Twichell, THE ODDS (Pittsburgh, 1986)

C. D. Wright, FURTHER ADVENTURES WITH YOU (Carnegie-Mellon, 1986)

One of the most encouraging developments in American poetry in the past few years has been the emergence of a number of younger women poets of striking originality and power. While it has sometimes seemed that the work of some of our familiar male poets has become a little enervated and, well, familiar, scarcely has a recent FIELD editorial board meeting gone by without our exclaiming over the freshness and arresting quality of a woman poet hitherto unknown to us. What these women often have in common is uncommon intelligence and a restless, quirky habit of association and juxtaposition; the formidable models of Sandra McPherson and Laura Jensen are clearly before them. Names I think of immediately include Lee Upton (whose *The Invention of Kindness* was one of the high points of 1984), Marianne Boruch (whose *View from the Gazebo* Alberta Turner reviewed here a year ago), Lynne McMahon, and Barbara Molloy-Olund (both of whom have books out from Wesleyan soon). Whether this constitutes a trend it's perhaps rash to say, but the appearance of three new books of considerable appeal is an encouraging sign.

Deborah Digges' *Vesper Sparrows* is a book of impressive delicacy and control; intensely personal though not confessional, its thematic center is evolution (Darwin makes several appearances), the process by which painful circumstance is transmuted through acts of courage and perseverance. Divorce, illness, exile, death — all recur often here, and yet the tone of the volume is finally celebratory: there is a strong and largely persuasive sense of hard-won clarity and acceptance:

If anything can teach us not to be afraid,

it is the light which owns nothing, which holds
the snow-stripped sycamore against itself, still
and brilliant and without shadow as it opens
these rooms filled for months with your absence.

Love, I can almost imagine summer.
How the green world begins.

("To S.")

Sometimes the sense of resolution can seem a little insistent, which pushes the poems over into bathos or predictability ("To a Milkweed" is for me one example), but for the most part the sentiments are richly earned.

The most impressive poems in the collection, the ones in which Digges' sensibility seems most distinctive, link several different narrative or meditative lines in what at first seem fairly casual or arbitrary ways, until the underlying associative pattern emerges. The title poem brings together bird lore and the dead at Bellevue Hospital. "The New World" juxtaposes a friend's cross-country drive after surgery with the mysteries of air travel and the pain of domestic arrangements after a divorce. "Laws of Falling Bodies" improbably links her physician father to Galileo in prison:

He came each morning to touch
where a breast had been, his fingers
grazing the length of an incision
that stopped just short of the heart like
bird tracks in snow, like the days

Galileo marked off in coal before a window,
then all night swung the gold lamp
on its chain, timing each wide arc against
the pulse strong in his groin,
until the wick sputtered and went cold.

Digges *knows* it's improbable — the stanza break flaunts it, as does the nervy pun of the title — and yet by the end, after she has woven together the stories of the two men's quite different quests for scientific truth, the portrait of the father in solitary old age gains terrific tenderness and urgency:

> And if I'm wrong, if all those women
> wanted was the thick fist of morphine
> hitting the brain, to me it was a kind
> of love he made, as he leaned over them,
> as he witnessed the pain lifting.
> Their eyes widened, like staring into
> the sun. He touched their hair
> grown back enough to comb since the last
> flash of radiation. They let go
> and slept, sometimes went blind in sleep,
> as the bald gaze of the wig's globe
> forgotten on the sill. Beyond it
> the evening's first litany of stars
> rose over the town they were born in,
> *Andromeda, Lyrae, Orion,* each
> with its own brilliant lies, stars
> long dead behind a light thrown earthward
> where these clear summer nights
> my father, like a young suitor, sits out
> on the lawn. But will not name them.
> Even the ones with names.

It's what she does with the details, of course, that makes this work, the way "like a young suitor" folds back on medicine as lovemaking, the "brilliant lies" of starlight on the earlier images of light and dark, the constellations on Galileo the astronomer, the present on the past. This technique is a risky business, and it doesn't always work so effectively: sometimes she tries too hard, and the structure gets a little too insistent or topheavy (as in "The Descent of Man"). But its best results suggest habits of mind that are daring and generous and sure.

I'd like to quote one Digges poem entire; like others it begins prosaically, even flatly, and develops lyrical power as it proceeds:

PAINTING BY NUMBER

On the way home from church my land-
locked father would stop the car
and let us run a while along this hillside
skirting the new graves
that with the last spring rain
took earth and all down
and sucked at our Sunday shoes.
Sometimes we asked him to read us
the names, the numbers of ones
who'd been his patients, maybe
to hear his voice fall back to its
first language, as it sounded
summer evenings when he pointed out
the constellations. There was the farmer
who would come to the front door,
his big face already jaundiced, luminous,
as if death were light inside him.
He'd bring a picture for payment
saying it was his hobby now that he was
dying to paint what he'd never seen.
What he had seen was winter wheat
sickled by hand, and the earth
turned over, black, bordering the river.
Each year his field grew smaller
so that he'd made this other, wave by wave,
covering the numbers, color
by color, until he'd emptied the cardboard
canvas of anything but sky
bearing down on blue, any boat,
the back of a man painted out,
oars wing-tipping the water.

At first glance this seems a strange sort of hybrid, the two stories — that of the family outing and that of the farmer-patient — only tenuously joined. Gradually we discover how carefully the fabric has been woven, the diptych hinged: the land-locked father and the land-locked farmer ("Each year his field grew smaller"), the sinking graves and "the earth / turned over," the numbers on the tombstones and the paint-by-numbers landscape, the father's constellations and the farmer's luminous face. What is utterly unpredictable is the way the focus comes to settle on that painting, and how the farmer — and thus the poem — transcends the banality of painting by numbers. "Painted out" is I think deliberately ambiguous, but what I take to happen is that the farmer consciously subverts the printed landscape by painting over its human subject, the man in the rowboat, thus anticipating his own mortality. In his urgency "to paint what he'd never seen" he fills the canvas with waves, but in doing so he is also painting his own death. The miniature portrait is subtle and very true, I think, the poem as a whole a curious and careful elegy. Digges at her best is impressive indeed.

Chase Twichell is a wonderfully imaginative and prodigiously gifted poet. Unfortunately, her gifts are not always handled very skillfully, which makes her second volume a pretty uneven affair. *The Odds* is less thematically centered than the Digges book; its strengths are musical and imagistic, and its best poems are haunting, plangent, largely unparaphraseable. Twichell often focuses on life lived at the margins, on the extremes of emotional and spiritual existence; even poems derived from everyday experience are so sensually heightened as to seem feverish, sometimes neurotic. As she says, she finds "distortion thrilling." Writing poems this intuitive involves enormous risks. When she manages it effectively, the results are exciting, taking us into the dimension of the truly surprising and mysterious.

But too often these effects seem merely willful, achieved through overwriting, pumping up the rhetoric unnecessarily. Her images are strong enough not to need the too-literary adjective or strained symbolism of phrases like "the profound adagio

of an axe" or "The lamps come on / with precocious nostalgia" or "The nacreous undersides of clouds / float truthfully overhead" or

> Such happiness conjugates easily,
> unobstructured by the tonnage
> of biography, or the unlikelihood
> of the heart's revival.

As that last passage might suggest, I don't think Twichell handles abstractions well; sometimes (as in the title poem) they seem a way of distancing herself from the clearly painful experience on which the poem is based, but the results are often woolly. The book includes two long poems, both sprawling and indulgent; in one, "My Ruby of Lasting Sadness," a lament for lost love, we get passages like this:

> And so I kissed some mouths
> that did not thrill me,
> though they thrilled me
> a little later, in retrospect.
> Most loves are flurries
> in a season unripe for snow.
> I could swear that the heart
> is miraculous,
> a temple of mysteries,
> so that faith and endurance
> resurrect it whole
> and coral-innocent.
> It is not so.

And there's a good deal more in this vein.

Despite these reservations, I'd urge readers to seek out this volume for the poems that match their quirky and surprising subjects with language that is plainer and more authentic. Here, for instance, is another poem about love:

LET X

Let *x* equal a birthday,
the point at which
the unknown segment of a life
attaches to the known.
Who wouldn't drive a little fast,
dosed with the moon and a red car,
having laughed past midnight
with another woman
about men, how simple they are,
how dangerous,
each one with his own translation,
imagination into love.

I think of the body before
and the body afterward,
its history of counterparts,
the thieves it housed,
the travelers.
A hand on my breast,
where none is now,
a mouth on my mouth,
summoned by the talk of minds
well versed in partial darkness,
the music beating in the radio,
the hazardous moonlit roads.

To my mind that's a far more successful poem than the others I've quoted. It's presumably based on personal experience, but rhetorically the poem is a series of subtle deflections and displacements, the short lines serving to parcel out the surprises, balancing algebraic formula against the poet's birthday, past against present, generalization against a reckless moonlit drive, simplicity against danger. It's partly the playfulness, the sense of keeping several balls in the air at once, that makes it exhilarating, and partly the particularity of the language, its utter ease.

I'll let one other longer poem exemplify the volume's considerable strengths:

RELIGIOUS WATER

Staggered by cold and currents,
a man in waders casts
toward a riffle upstream,
teasing the intimate line back in.
The water spills subliminal vowels
around him, and the sound
is an opacity that luck might violate.
His children once were fish
in the passing mystery. And then
a sudden muscle in the old bamboo,
a trout hooked hard in the lip.

A father and a fisherman,
but not at once,
not even in the same thought,
so pure is each.
An ache runs between them
like a fast cold brook.
The netted life
thrashes at that borderline,
the skin of many colors
dries to neutral paper in the creel.
His other wishes swim away
into the icy camouflage,
quick and lost among the dim,
religious voices in the water.

The knife tugs in the belly.
The pearly split, bloodless,
opens on a trove of rosy eggs . . .
which makes the man,

who kneels now on the bank,
shake his head at ignorance.
With only a thumbnail, we can clean away
the tender membrane all along the spine
and wash into the talking stream
whatever part of human nature
rose toward the iridescence of a cure.

I don't pretend to understand everything in this poem, but indeed its sense of mystery is what I admire most about it. We may surmise, for example, that the fisherman is the poet's own father (who makes several appearances in the book), but certainly the poem doesn't depend on that identification. Nothing feels willful here; Twichell's instinctive, associative vision is perfectly balanced by the precise yet richly sensual language. Literally the poem narrates the fishing story from casting to gutting, but along the way it accrues subliminal, overlapping meanings: the language is icily precise and oddly dreamlike simultaneously. The fish become the man's children and his own aspirations ("His other wishes swim away / into the icy camouflage"). The stream is repeatedly identified as language ("subliminal vowels," "the dim, / religious voices in the water," "the talking stream"). And over the whole broods the strange, almost allegorical title. This method is more complex than Digges' double narratives: here it is virtually impossible to sort out what is the literal ground from which the poem springs. In the last stanza, the man slits the fish, exposes its eggs, and shakes his head at the ignorance — of the fish for taking the hook? of himself for catching the fertile fish? of nature for breaking its cycle of renewal and possibility? At the end the fisherman is generalized into a "we," and cleaning the fish becomes a sort of chastened purifying of human nature, although after repeated readings I'm still not sure what to make of the final line. The point, finally, is that the poem's authority has earned my confidence, so that the ending seems accurate and resonant, even if I'm unsure of its intention. Twichell's passionate, liminal vision is highly distinctive, and I look forward to the continued development of her work.

Having made my admiration for C. D. Wright's work clear in a review (FIELD #28, Spring 1983) of her previous book, *Translations of the Gospel Back into Tongues*, I can confine myself here largely to saying that *Further Adventures With You* equally rewards the considerable attention it requires. Not that Wright is content to repeat her performance — in the intervening time she's left Arkansas, lived in San Francisco and Mexico, and now teaches in Rhode Island, and her perspective has correspondingly evolved. As she says in the feisty, cleareyed preface that opens the volume, she is "no longer committed to pursuing a course whereby my language is rife with *idiom Ozarkia*. . . . While I prefer cornbread crumbled in buttermilk to sushi, I do not write from my lost life alone, any more than I dictate every term by which I do write." There are Ozark memory poems here, but others feel deliberately untethered and hallucinatory, while still others blaze with a contemporary political sensibility, an anger about body bags and Mutually Assured Destruction. What gives the book its unity and consistency is Wright's astonishingly vivid, to-the-bone, confident sense of detail, and her voice, alternatively bleak and rowdy, muscular and genuinely unique.

The preface provides a perfectly apt description of the poems: "My poems are about desire, conflict, the dearth of justice for all. About persons of small means. They are succinct but otherwise orthodox novels in which the necessary characters are brought out, made intimate (that is, they reveal themselves), engage in dramatic action and leave the scene forever with or without a resolution in hand or sight." Well, "succinct but otherwise orthodox" fudges a bit: it sometimes feels as though key elements of the plot are left for us to intuit, and the casual, intuitive progression asks a great deal of the reader. But Wright is a storyteller at heart, and the narrative base helps give the poems energy and coherence.

Here, for instance, is the second half of "Provinces," a poem characteristic in its unpredictability and bizarre, deadpan tone:

> Because the body's dwelling is stone, perched over water,
> we say the body is privileged. Akin to characters

in Lawrence books, its livelihood is obscured. It owns
a horse named Campaign it mounts on foggy morns.
That was the body's first lie. It has no horse
and wouldn't climb on one. Because the body lives
so far from others, it likes reading about checkered lives
in the metropoli. It likes moving around at night under its dress.
When it travels, bottles of lotion open in its bags.
Early in March the big rains came — washing all good thoughts
from the body's cracks and chinks. By now the body admits
it is getting on, and yet, continues to be tormented
by things being the way they are. Recently the body took
one of the old trees for a wife, but the union has broken down.
The light has bored out of the body's long house.
Fog envelops its stone flanks. Still the body
enjoys rappelling to the water. And it likes the twenty-four
stores,
walking up and down the aisles, not putting a thing in its basket.

I can't imagine anyone else writing this. The poem veers crazily between the mythic (its first line is "Where the old trees reign with their forward dark") and the banally domestic, and somehow ends up perched precariously in between. Somewhere along the way we realize that "the body" is just a strangely removed way of talking about the self that is speaking ("That was the body's first lie"), whose experience is not so different from our own ("When it travels, bottles of lotion open in its bags"). But familiarity is again nudged aside by oddity (marriage with a tree, light boring out of the house). To end the poem with an image of the aimless pleasure of shopping is typical of the giddy confidence that marks this book — it's an exhilarating performance.

Wright includes a number of prose poems that are intense and visionary but finally less satisfying than the rest of the volume. Some feel like automatic writing, and without the narrative underpinning the language tends to seem a little self-indulgent and the dissociation a bit familiar. Otherwise, though, the book feels wonderfully assured and consistent. I want to quote one

longer poem entire, to represent Wright's uncanny magic at its best:

THE LEGEND OF HELL

A few hours ago a woman went on a walk.
Her phone rang and rang.
What a pleasure, she said to herself,
To walk in the fields and pick walnuts.

A moment ago a white dog
whose chain snared a shopping cart,
barked and barked.
Someone sauntered through an orchard
with murdering the whole family on his mind.

At the Black Pearl dancing was nightly.
That Sonnyman showed up again,
too tall for his clothes.
The pretentious copper beech threw its final shadow
on the D.A.'s house. Where we were living,
you wouldn't dream of going unaccompanied.

A few hours ago you could be at the movies,
borrow a comb from a stranger.
In the cities you had your braille libraries;
couples dining on crustacean
with precious instruments. In the provinces
you had your jug bands, anabaptists sharing their yield.

Then comes the wolf:
in a room of a house on a plain
lie the remains of Great Aunt Gladys
the quintessential Bell operator
sent many a rose by many a party in pain.

(By remains, we mean depression
left by her big body on her high bed);
over here we have an early evening scene without figures,
the soft parts of children blown into trees.
Our neighbors are putting on their prettiest things.
Their clocks have stopped but all hearts calibrated.

They say they are ready now
to make their ascension into light.
And you Edward Teller we know you're out there
shelling nuts; saying to yourself alone,
Now this is a pleasure.

homage to Barbara McClintock

It's a Boschian landscape brought shatteringly up to date, an apocalyptic before and after. The first four stanzas might be taken as a random sequence of images, and indeed the very randomness is the point as they cohere to build a portrait of daily multiplicity. But with the pointedness of "Then comes the wolf" the poem shifts from past to present, to a lightly but devastatingly sketched world of death, stopped time, and heavenly ascension. And with the name of Edward Teller the focus comes clear, the underlying postnuclear narrative emerges. The subtlety with which the arresting, uncompromising vision emerges is typical of Wright in full stride. Her powerful poems, like those of Digges and Twichell, are well worth seeking out.

David Walker

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The cycle of poems by VASKO POPA in this issue will be part of the expanded and updated reissue of his **Homage to the Lame Wolf**, originally Number 2 and now Number 12 in the FIELD Translation Series, due this summer. The newest collection by his translator CHARLES SIMIC, **Unending Blues**, is reviewed in this issue by David Young.

DENNIS SCHMITZ still lives and works in Sacramento, California. His most recent book is **Singing** (Ecco, 1985). He recently won the di Castagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America for a manuscript in progress.

New on the WILLIAM STAFFORD front: **You Must Revise Your Life**, a book of essays from Michigan; **An Oregon Message**, due soon from Harper & Row; and two chapbooks from Honeybrook Press, **Brother Wind** and **You and Some Other Characters**.

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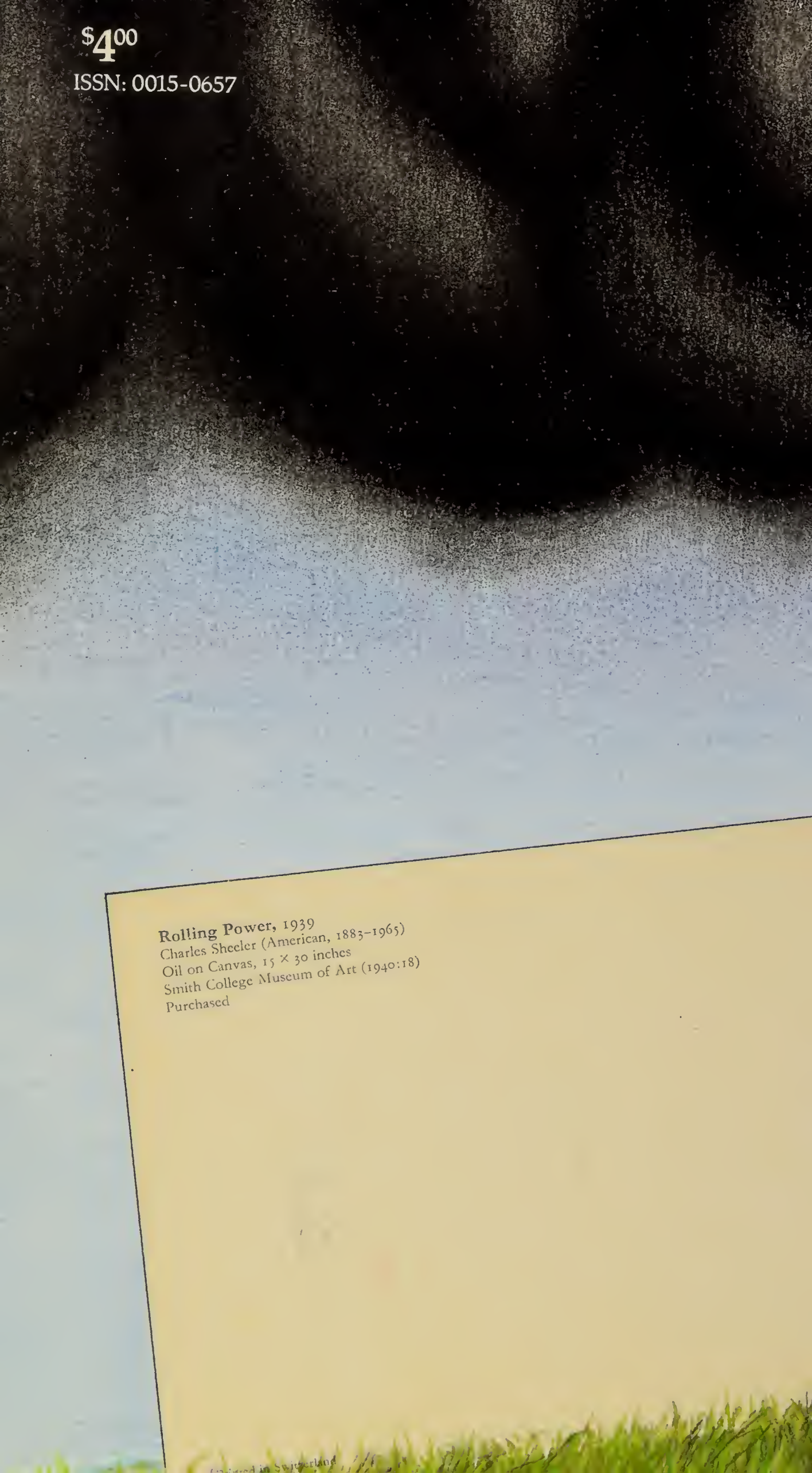

Rolling Power, 1939
Charles Sheeler (American, 1883–1965)
Oil on Canvas, 15 × 30 inches
Smith College Museum of Art (1940:18)
Purchased

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